M. Rickert: Don't Ask

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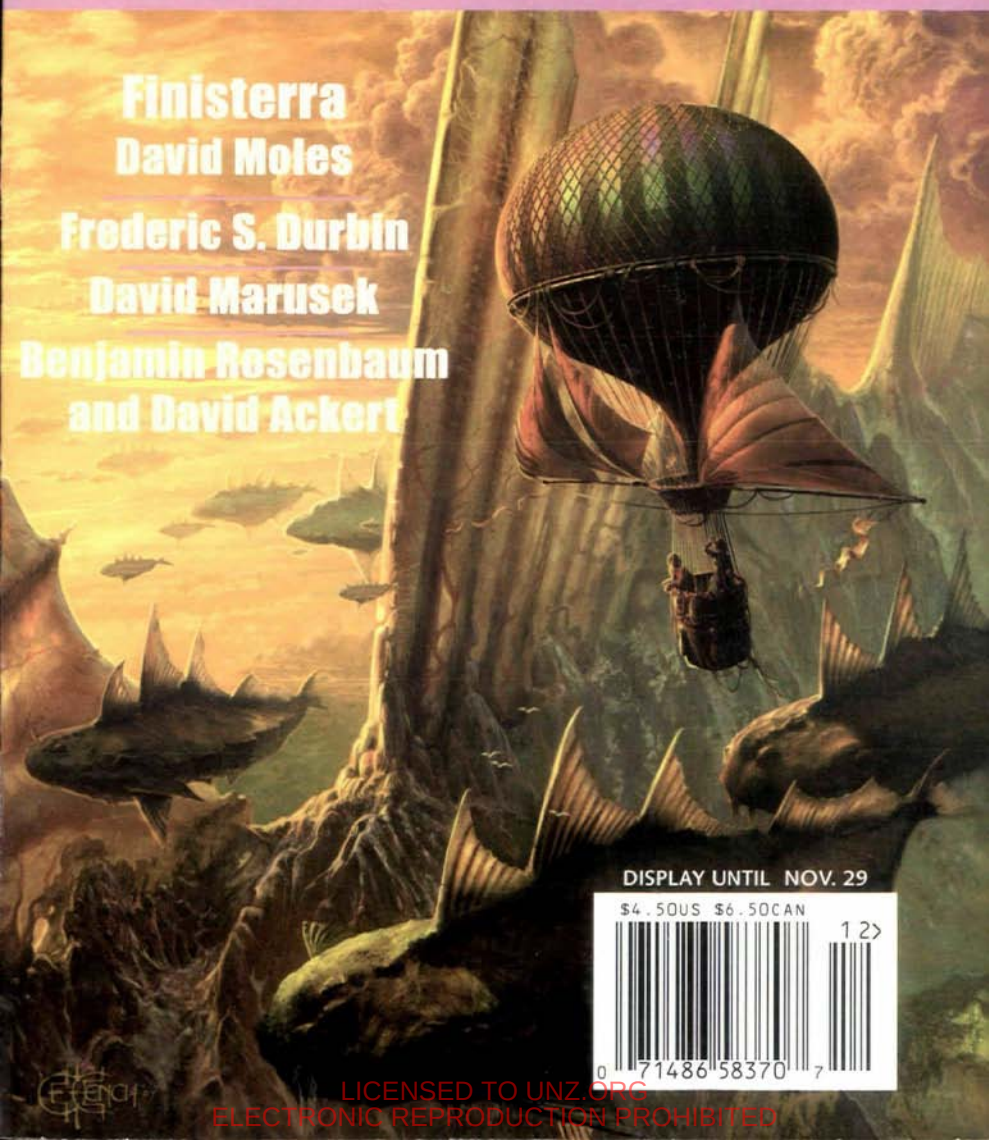

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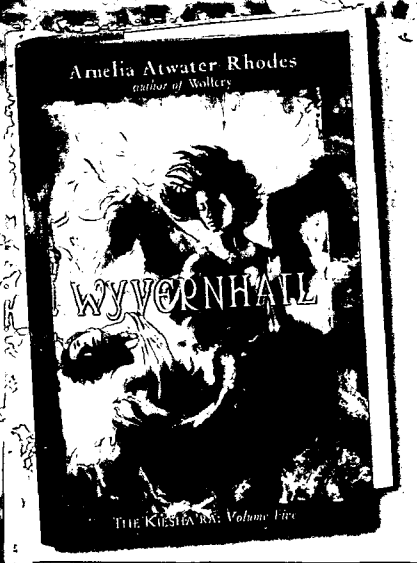

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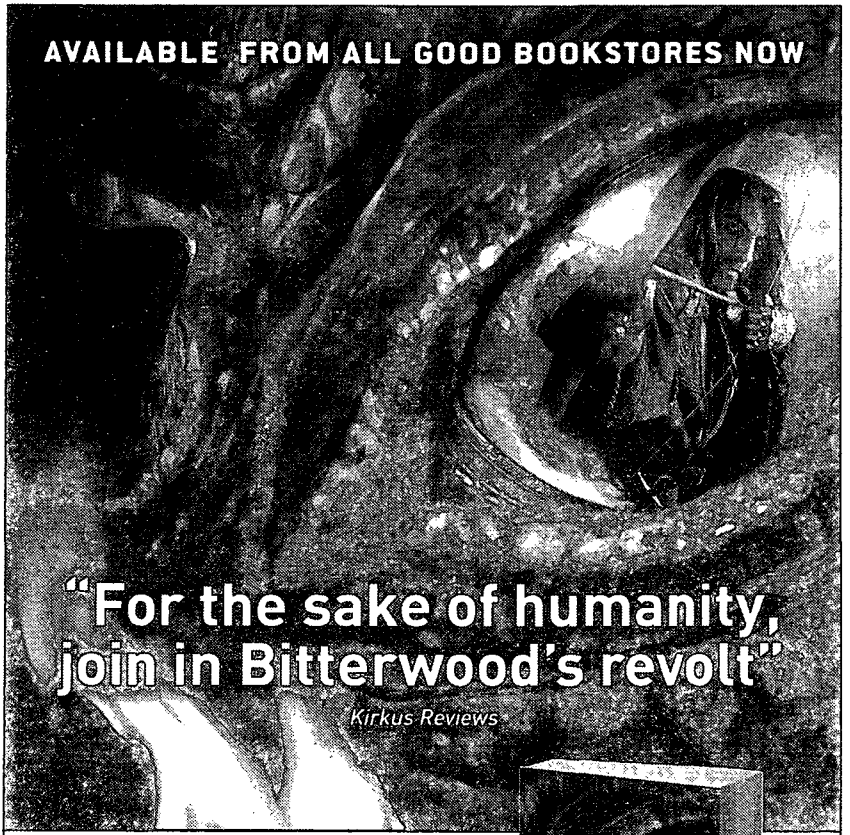

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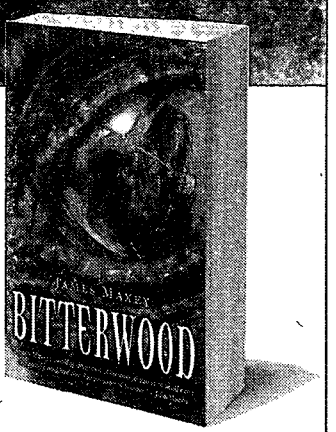

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December • 59th Year of Publication

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COVER BY CORY AND CATSKA ENCH FOR "FINISTERRA"

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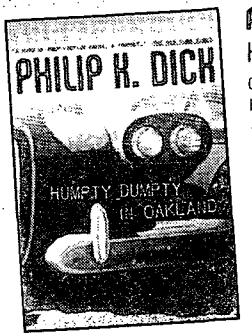

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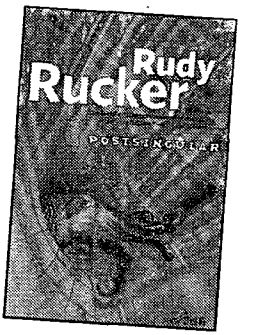

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Our opening story this month is a somewhat grim look at the near future. It was first published in the March/April 2007 issue of MIT's Technology Review *magazine and it's still available on their Website, but we thought that most* F&SF *readers would appreciate seeing it here.*

David Marusek has been publishing short fiction since 1993, mostly in Asimov's. *His short fiction was recently collected in* Getting to Know You, *which is currently a finalist for the 2007 Quill Award. His first novel,* Counting Heads, *came out in 2005 to much acclaim. This information can all be found online at* www.marusek.com, *along with a bit of information about his days as a Homer "spit rat." A longtime resident of Alaska, Mr. Marusek is currently back in Homer, finishing up his next novel,* Mind Over Oship.

Osama Phone Home

By David Marusek

WE ARRIVED BY RENTAL CAR and parked next to a delivery van in the lot closest to the freeway on-ramp. The van hid us from the security cam atop a nearby light pole. We were early, traffic being lighter than expected. As we waited, we touched up our disguises.

At 09:55, we left the car singly and proceeded to our target site by separate mall entrances. I rode the escalators to the food court on the third level, while G, C, and B quickly reconned the lower floors, where shops were just opening their grates.

I started at the burger stand and ordered a breakfast sandwich. The girl behind the counter was pretty, mid-twenties, talking on her cell. She snapped it shut and asked, without making eye contact, if I wanted something to drink with that. She looked as if she'd been crying. I said no thanks, and she rang up and assembled my order. As she did so, I ticked off the mental checklist we had memorized: slurring of speech — negative; loss of balance or coordination — negative. About two dozen data points in all.

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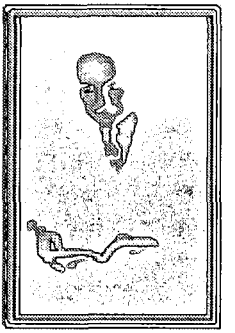

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When my receipt printed out, she tore it off with a deft flick of her wrist and glanced up at me. Apparently that was all it took, because she said, "I'm only working here to kill my mother."

I made no reply, as per instructions, and fresh tears welled in her eyes. "Oh, it's true!" she declared. "I'm a spiteful daughter who only lives to torment her mother. I admit it! I have a freakin' master's degree in marketing from NYU, and I was a founding owner of Toodle-Do.biz. I practically *ran* Toodle-Do from my bedroom. Sixteen hours a day! But did she care? No! She was all, 'Why don't you find a *real* job?' She couldn't even comprehend what Toodle-Do was. I mean, I could tie her to a chair and put a fucking laptop in her fucking lap and use her own finger to point at the screen, and *still* she can't see it. I mean, what do I have to do?"

Once she was rolling, the young woman's confession built up momentum and volume, and her coworkers glanced nervously at us. "I'll tell you what I did! I sold my shares in Toodle-Do and took the most demeaning, most mindless 'real job' I could find!" She gestured to take in the whole burger stand. "See that?" She pointed at the deep-fat fryers, where a pimply boy was racking baskets of fries. "I stand next to *boiling grease* all day. When I go home, I don't even have to open my mouth. No way! It's in my hair. It's in my clothes. It's in my *skin*." She raised both wrists to her nose and inhaled. "I smell like a freakin' *exhaust fan*, and it *drives her mad!* Oh, it pushes her *right over the edge!* My grandmother died of a stroke when she was only in her *fifties*, and every night I pray to *God* to give my mother one too!"

She went on like this, and the fries boy came over to add masturbatory sins of his own, but I'd heard enough and took my egg sandwich to the seating area. I spied a middle-aged man in a rumpled suit talking on a cell phone. He had a cup of coffee, so I went over to sit near him. He was so engrossed in his conversation that he didn't notice me eavesdropping.

"Uh-huh...uh-huh," he said while pushing doughnut crumbs around the tabletop with his finger. "The reason I called...uh-huh...the reason I called...uh-huh." He took a final sip of coffee and said, "Listen, Ted, shut up for a minute, will you? I have something important to say. Yeah...that's right. You're my brother, and I love you, but I've been holding this back for too long. Uh-huh...You know Billy? Yeah, your kid,

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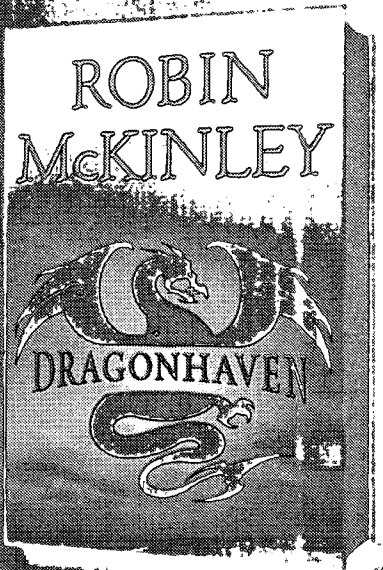

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Billy, only he's" — the man wiped his brow with a paper napkin — "he's not your son. He's your *nephew*."

There was a long pause, and then the man continued, "What the *hell* do I mean? I'll tell you what the *hell* I mean." And he did so, in excruciating detail. I half listened as I checked off my list: muscle twitching — negative; bizarre behavior — negative. Out of the corner of my eye I watched G, C, and B working the other tables, approaching anyone drinking coffee from one of our vendors.

We compared notes on the drive back to the motel. Beyond a doubt, True Confessions was a keeper. The early reports on its harmlessness seemed justified. Nevertheless, C's idea of delivering test doses via adulterated coffee was a brilliant precaution, because no children became involved. We're patriots, not monsters.

M's part in the operation had concluded that morning, and when we arrived at the motel room, she was in the bathroom removing tattoos. We quickly changed our clothes and cleaned the room for final departure, meanwhile logging our test results. M came out of the bathroom a new brunette with scrubbed pink arms, and B and G went in to remove their disguises. M walked around the room gathering up her things and asking how it all went. C looked up from his handset long enough to say, "It's true! No offense is too large or too small for a detailed accounting."

M nodded thoughtfully, then turned to me and said, "And this is a good thing, why?"

I just grinned, and she let it drop, said she had to go get her kid, and left.

G, meanwhile, was in the bathroom brewing up a celebratory pot of coffee. His idea of a joke.

Six years ago, in March 2002, I happened to attend a barbecue in the backyard of some good friends. As the flesh sizzled on the grill, we attempted small talk to pass the time, as we usually did. But in those early months, feelings were still too raw for small talk.

Fortunately, there was beer.

Someone had read an article — "The Battle of the Organizational

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Making Money
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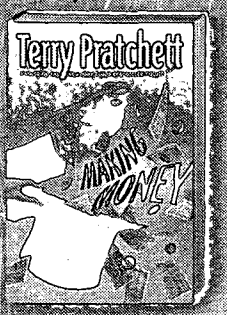

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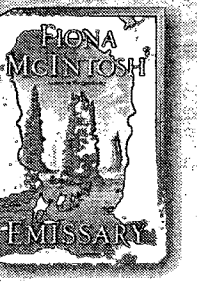

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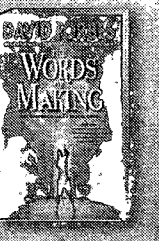

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Charts" — comparing the relative efficacies of a classical top-down hierarchy like General Motors and a distributed network like al-Qaeda. Apparently, the term "al-Qaeda" means "the database" in Arabic and was coined in the 1980s, when we were fielding freedom fighters in our Afghan proxy war against the Soviets. Not an operational organization itself, al-Qaeda is a sort of "Ford Foundation for jihadist startups," as a pundit put it, that provides support in the form of financing, expertise, and coordination. In an "ah-ha moment," one of us, with a mouth full of pulled pork, bragged that our old college crowd could form such an organization. Even better — because we weren't limited to box-cutter technology, we could out-qaeda al-Qaeda.

It was a beer-soaked boast, soon forgotten. But not a week later, the president of the United States held a news conference at the White House. When reporters asked him about Osama bin Laden, who had recently escaped capture by our troops in Afghanistan, he said, "I truly am not that concerned about him."

In all honesty, this presidential statement floored me. Not concerned about bin Laden? How could our president not be concerned about him? Was there anything our government could have found to say to the American people that day more knuckleheaded than this?

A few of my friends gathered again, this time stone sober. We played one of bin Laden's videotaped sermons to the West. This lunatic with a Kalashnikov, wagging his finger at our whole culture, had somehow slipped through our military's grasp at Tora Bora. We should have had him — but we didn't. And then — according to the president — he and his whole murderous crew dropped off our radar altogether?

That didn't sit well with my friends and me, but we weren't sure what to make of it. The news-conference dismissal might have been nothing more than our president's sometimes difficult way with words. Or his inability to admit to failure. But we didn't think so. Most likely it was the president's way of admitting that the hunt for bin Laden had gotten lost in the shuffle on the road to war in Iraq. It made us wonder if there wasn't a place for private citizens in the war on terror. Perhaps we could lend a hand.

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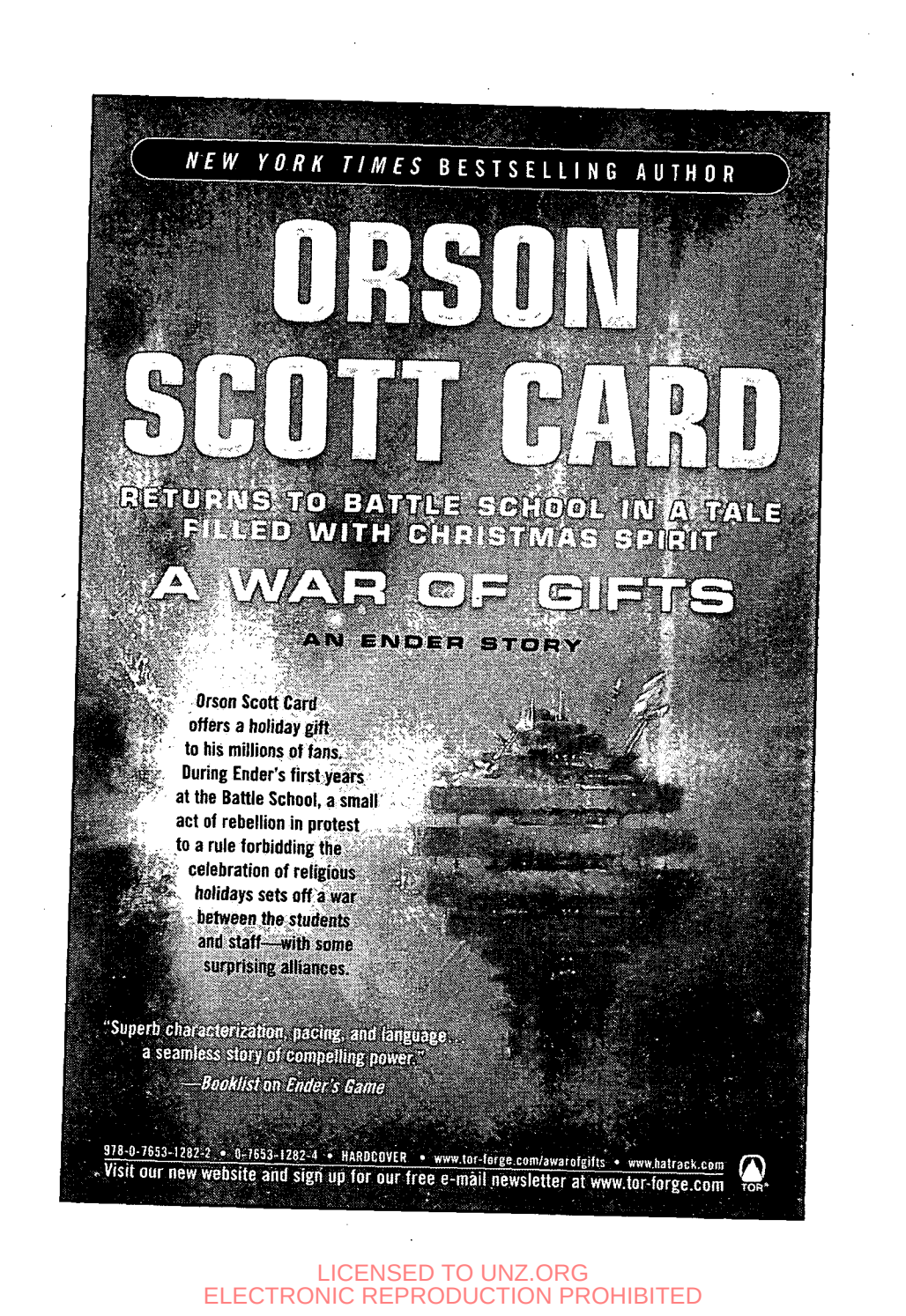
A WAR OF GIFTS

AN ENDER STORY



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An affinity group can form around any mutual interest: tasting Beaujolais wines, singing in a choir, attending a communal sauna. We called our group the American Curling Club. We are a small group of men and women who roomed and/or socialized together in college back in the day. We came from middle-class families and attended a prestigious, but not Ivy League, school. There wasn't a legacy among us. We pretty much put ourselves through school with student loans, scholarships and grants, parental handouts, and part-time jobs.

After graduation, we went our separate ways but kept in touch. We attended each other's weddings, and we are watching each other's kids grow up. We have built comfortable lives. We have climbed to upper-management positions in our chosen fields. We firmly believe in freedom and free markets. We are Christians, or at least most of us are. We're your average janes and joes with no particular axe to grind, except this one — Osama bin Laden must pay *in full measure* for what he has done.

THE AMERICAN CURLING CLUB formed in order to play a key role in bringing bin Laden to justice: namely, to locate him. It seemed to us to be an important and doable project. If our government couldn't or wouldn't find him, we would. And when we found him, if only his grave, we would forward his coordinates to the relevant agencies. We would do this as a public service, not for the twenty-five-million-dollar State Department bounty on him.

Though our mission was lawful, we realized that pursuing it might require us to bend a few rules and make a few enemies. So we pledged our own lives and liberty to each other and swore an oath of secrecy. We established appropriate security protocols to shield the ACC core group.

Collectively, we had expertise in a number of fields, including telecommunications, biochemistry, the military, civil government, and finance, but our contacts extended far into other areas. Each of us was charged with organizing further assets — networked cells and task groups — behind strong firewalls. Initially we chipped in our own savings to bootstrap our enterprise, but eventually our swifty cells became adept at targeting bank transfers in large offshore money-laundering operations.

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Soon we were able to finance ourselves by imposing "sin taxes" on drug cartels and playboy dictators. To name a few.

In the summer and fall of 2002, while we were recruiting our go-to, wizard, swifty, lineman, and expat cells, we met frequently to bat around ideas for achieving mission success. Because truly brilliant ideas can sound crazy at first, and because committees smother ideas, we declared that during our freewheeling brainstorming sessions no idea was too outrageous to say out loud.

What if we invented a surrender dust, keyed to bin Laden's DNA?

Or what about informer dust storms?

Our powers of imagination were running a bit hot in those days. What with all the news of war and rumors of war. What with the anthrax, Saddam, and the shoe bomber who ruined air travel forever.

What if we embedded artificial memories in people throughout the Middle East so that they were certain they remembered Osama mocking the Prophet in public?

What if we afflicted all adult males taller than six foot three in the tribal regions of Pakistan with the mother of all tooth abscesses, requiring immediate dental surgery in Peshawar, and then watched the dentists?

With righteous fervor, in sessions that lasted through the night, we loosed the dogs of ingenuity upon the Sheikh of Saudi Arabia.

What if we made the mountains of eastern Afghanistan begin to hum? An unrelenting low-frequency thrumming that seemed to rise from the very rocks and that drove people out into open spaces screaming and tearing their hair?

My own résumé nominated me to form and coordinate our go-to cells, including an elite cell that I headed myself. Among my first recruits were several Desert Storm vets whose toughness and loyalty were known to me. They, in turn, helped me do background checks and interviews to fill out their own cells.

People claim that this nation of ours is too polarized, that we hardly recognize the other half that doesn't think as we do. But I'm here to say there's one issue that all Americans can agree on, no matter where they stand on most everything else: our nation won't rest until Osama bin

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Laden faces justice. This truth alone was our most effective recruitment tool. We characterized the ACC as an off-the-books government black op with one simple mission. The fact that we paid well, and in cash, helped, too.

Eventually it was time to tether our brainstorming to reality. Our wizard cells were up and running, and we passed them our favorite ideas for critical feedback. They, in turn, fed us weekly "News-to-Use" summaries of developments across a broad range of fields. Our brilliant ideas became somewhat tempered by scientific reality.

For instance, geneticists are cultivating plants that grow medicines in their leaves and fruit. They already have a potato rabies vaccine and a tomato HIV drug. Transgenic tobacco plants alone produce dozens of "farmaceuticals," everything from human growth hormone to cancer drugs.

What if we engineered a hybrid tomato or lettuce crop that contained a therapeutic dose of Xanax or Prozac and introduced it to the Middle East? Could that help reduce the bloodshed? Seriously, treat a whole region like a patient.

Or: Does Osama use sunscreen? For decades, sunscreen was whitish and opaque because of the properties of one of its chief ingredients, zinc oxide. In the 1990s, researchers found that if they made the zinc oxide particles really tiny, they could produce a much more pleasing clear sunscreen. It was one of the first commercial successes of nanotechnology, and the source of the first nanotech-related product liability lawsuits.

The problem was that nanoparticles are so small they pass through the skin and enter the bloodstream. They even cross the blood-brain barrier and come to rest, like shells on a beach, in the sun worshiper's brain.

Researchers wondered if nanoparticles could be designed to collect in other kinds of tissue — feathers, for instance. That's what one radar ornithology group is attempting to find out in an avian-flu-related study for the DoI. They are sizing and shaping nanoparticles of various materials to pass through the birds' skin and collect in developing feathers. Their ultimate goal is to nanobrand entire flocks of birds on the wing for precise tracking across the globe by radar.

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What if we found nanoparticles that collect in hair and beards instead? Our flocks would be the occupants of jihadist camps, caves, and villages. We could detect and track them remotely.

While the core group was still wrestling the angels of inspiration, my go-to cells were employed in preliminary logistical tasks: establishing safe houses, moving cash, rounding up supplies for the wizard cells. In this latter effort, C came to the fore with his experience in corporate R&D. We purchased several whole laboratories' worth of gear and dropped it in self-storage units on both coasts. Because the ACC had rightly ruled out the use of germs or bombs (we're patriots, not terrorists), we weren't trafficking in restricted material per se. But lately our government has taken to quietly monitoring sales of even innocuous gear like beakers and pipettes, and we took great pains to leave no trail.

We knew from the start that one of the ACC's strengths was its position in the telecom industry, and we soon realized that Uncle Sam had provided us an easy leg up in prosecuting our mission.

Al-Qaeda is notorious for passing communication by hand in order to circumvent electronic surveillance. One reason for this has to do with bin Laden's own personal experience in the 1990s. According to news accounts at the time, Osama bin Laden really liked talking on his Inmarsat satellite phone. He especially enjoyed calling his mother in Saudi Arabia from his Afghan camps. We know this because the NSA was listening in on their conversations from at least 1996. This happy arrangement, along with Osama's charming naïveté, came to an abrupt halt one day in August 1998, when he phoned his mother and told her he wouldn't be able to call "for a while." After hanging up, he turned off his sat phone. The next day, the president of the United States ordered a cruise missile strike on the phone's last known coordinates. We blew up a desert training camp that day, but the Dark Prince had already flown.

Is it any wonder that bin Laden became phone-shy after that? Most reasonable people would. At some point, the NSA decided that if it could no longer tap bin Laden's phone, the next best thing to do was tap everyone else's. This was actually not a bad idea, but it required compliant telecom companies to shunt complex spur lines into secret listening posts, often

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small rooms inside switching stations, where NSA spooks could sift billions of calls through their voodoo supercomputers. In creating this system, the NSA had done the heavy lifting for us, and our linemen inside the same telecoms tapped their taps. Soon we were channeling the same floodwaters of chatter, and we set our wizards trolling for keywords and casting social nets.

I MADE IT A POINT to become acquainted with the members of my go-to cells and their families, usually without anyone's knowledge. I confirmed that we had recruited outstanding individuals. Smart, gutsy, none of your house-in-the-burbs, corporate-treadmill types. These were the cut-ups in middle school, the teenage pregnancies, the try-everything-once crowd. A little older now, a little more God-fearing and respectful of real realities. Solid.

After the initial flurry of organization, I kept these folks busy every other weekend or so (kinda like it used to be for the National Guard). I kept my own elite group busier, if only with training exercises, several days or nights a week. Before long we were a pretty tight unit.

I had already worked with G, and he introduced me to C. And when I first recruited B, she told me about M, with whom she had served two tours. M was trained to pilot UAV combat drones, but lately she was back at home styling hair and raising a kid.

M had three kids, actually, but the older two had lived with their granny since they were born. Only the baby, a spoiled eight-year-old, lived with M. I found the kid hard to fool, but easy to bribe.

In late 2002, one of our wizards presented us with a tantalizing what-if. He owned a startup that had developed a gobsmackingly elegant algorithm for creating and identifying pretty good voiceprints from poor-quality audio. It processed voices acoustically with no regard to the language spoken and no use of keyword recognition.

What if we trained all the phones in the world to recognize bin Laden's voice? His and his people's. And whenever a phone anywhere recognized one of these voices speaking into it, it would discreetly send us a text message with its GPS coordinates and call details. And what if phones

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could be trained to do this remotely by a phone virus? Voiceprint libraries could be updated automatically. It looked as if we had finally found our 21st-century Yankee box cutter.

Because of the firewalls we had set in place, I learned who was in other cells and groups only on a need-to-know basis. Some of our groups included young people at the beginning of their careers. Like young people everywhere, they sometimes let their issues get in the way of their work. On occasion, my team was directed to remind individuals of the confidential nature of our mission. One such action involved a young computer genius in the Pacific Northwest. I sent M out there to investigate (Granny taking the kid temporarily). She reported back a few days later that the genius was a fool for pillow talk. To hear him speak, he was practically in charge of a counterterror task force. M also reported that the *real* loves of his life were his two Jack Russell terriers.

So I sent G up there to tutor the kid in the art of discretion. G did a Godfather on the pooches, and genius boy woke up the next morning with two little surprised expressions lying on the pillow next to him. End of bulletproof youth.

When M returned, she was very upset. She asked if that had really been necessary. Couldn't G have simply dognapped them for a few days to make a point? I said I would talk to him about it.

In early 2003, our weekly "News-to-Use" included three disparate bits of intel that, when put together, made an intriguing picture: (1) Pakistanis in the tribal regions were sneezing; (2) a sixty-year-old DoD skunkworks project had borne fruit; and (3) dandelions can make you high.

(1) *Ambrosia*, commonly known as ragweed and native to North and South America, hitched a ride to Europe in the 19th century. The joy of hay fever has been spreading across Europe ever since. Apparently, the winds of recent wars have carried ragweed farther east, where it has found a suitable niche in the valley ecosystems of northern Pakistan bordering Afghanistan. It's been found in Waziristan province as well, and as far south as Quetta. We requested specimens and seeds from an expat cell, and what we received seemed to be a cross between *A. artemisiifolia*, the most widespread species in North America, and *A. dumosa*, one that

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thrives in the Sonoran Desert. The Pakistani species was said to be a particularly noxious weed that pumped out clouds of pollen.

(2) Since World War I, the U.S. Army's Edgewood Arsenal and its successor unit have explored the use of chemicals in warfare, conducting open-air nerve-gas tests in Maryland and even dosing unsuspecting soldiers with superhallucinogens. Their perennial hobbyhorse has been a reliable truth serum, or at least one better than the problematic sodium pentothal. In recent decades much of the unit's preliminary work has been outsourced to civilian researchers. In 2003, there was buzz of a breakthrough: MDMOEP, a phenethylamine compound and kissing cousin of MDMA (or ecstasy). Dubbed True Confessions, it was said to induce a state of abject self-reproach. Subjects were anxious to unburden themselves of their life's misdeeds, and they actively sought out receptive listeners, including parties they might have injured. The drug was tested on volunteers and was said to be safe, with no lasting side effects. What a boon to the war on terror! If only it had been ready in time to avert the Abu Ghraib mess. In any case, the U.S. Army Chemical Corps swooped down on the private lab that had made the discovery, confiscated all records, and reminded all involved of the Patriot Act.

(3) A brilliant young geneticist on the West Coast was doing groundbreaking work in biopharmaceuticals, especially in the mechanics of directing what part of the plant would store the finished drug — leaf, root, seed, or fruit.

Moreover, according to our private sources, this same professor was also conducting a little biopharma project outside the purview of his university department. He was attempting to genetically modify the common dandelion to produce the marijuana cannabinoid THC. According to our report, once his stoner dandelion was perfected, the professor intended to take a sabbatical in order to scatter little parachute seeds of Mellow Yellow along roadways all over the temperate zone.

What galvanized us about these three items was the observation that both ragweed and dandelion are members of the same Asteraceae family. It made us wonder. It definitely got the wheels turning.

Development of our Yankee "vox cutter" proceeded quickly. The phone virus was coming along, and we had a SIMM chip in the works.

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However, we realized that even if we trained a million strategically located phone slaves to call us whenever they heard Osama's voice, or any voice in our voiceprint library, what good would that do us if Laden & Co. never lifted a receiver? We needed something to drive al-Qaeda to a phone. What we needed was a special friends-and-family calling plan for them, and we wondered if the army's new guilt serum might do the trick.

Not that we imagined for a moment that bin Laden felt any guilt or remorse over murdering three thousand Americans. But a crime doesn't have to be an atrocity to stimulate the TC effect: everyday misdemeanors might do, like shorting waiters or telling off-color jokes. Bin Laden is human and not an angel, and he must regret *something* he has done. He does have four wives, after all. And what about his fifty-three brothers and sisters and innumerable nephews and nieces? Just how many weddings and funerals did he have to miss while hiding in a cave? He inherited $80 million from his father and quickly turned it into $250 million. Even if that kind of return was earned honestly, how to explain to his twenty-four children that Daddy blew it all on jihad? And how to explain to them his thing for Whitney Houston?

We set things in motion. First off was sizing up the deposed skunkworks PI on the True Confessions project. I sent M and C up there to see if he wasn't suffering a case of defense-contractor hangover. He proved to be unapproachable, but one of his researchers had full-blown civil-liberties remorse. She had been caching her lab notes from the start and was trying to decide whether or not to post them anonymously on the Internet (as if that might absolve her). She was only too glad to turn them over to us — Amnesty International.

Before we could proceed any further, we had to test the drug ourselves in a real-world situation. There was no open or ethical way to do this, but at least we could do it in a controlled setting. So our wizards mixed up a test batch of TC, and my team performed our shopping-mall field trial. TC lived up to its billing, and the fact was not lost on us that many of our subjects turned to their cell phones for impromptu confessionals.

Next was enlisting Professor Mellow Yellow. I wanted to soften him up first, so I sent G and C to his university office posing as DEA agents to scare the bejesus out of him. I was waiting for him in his home greenhouse

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when he showed up an hour later. I was sitting on a stool next to a potting bench that held trays of dandelions. Some of the cheery yellow flowers were sugar-frosted with sticky cannabis resin. I introduced myself as Mr. Homeland Security and told him about all the kinds of trouble he was in. Then, in true TV cop-show fashion, I offered to call off the drug dicks if he volunteered to serve his country in a very important mission. As it turned out, Prof. Mellow was so enthused by our mission and the sheer complexity of his part in it that I almost regretted siccing the DEA crew on him.

I turned Prof. Mellow over to one of our wizard handlers and later learned that we set him up in a special complex of greenhouses, ostensibly doing research on new allergy meds for major pharma.

In order to spread our voiceprint traps, the ACC set up several NGOs to integrate vox-cutter tech into the public-call-office landline systems in Pakistani villages and to subsidize the extension of cell coverage in remote areas. Back at home, we sent go-tos on shopping trips to stockpile cheap prepaid cell phones. We made cash purchases of handsets at every Wal-Mart and Radio Shack across America. We shipped boxloads of them to linemen who replaced their chips with our own vox-cutter SIMMs and bundled them for distribution with hand-crank chargers.

Our wizards were keeping tabs on the town where we staged our shopping-center test. We were monitoring for any possible fallout or aftereffects, such as a change in homicide, suicide, or domestic-violence rates. The only aftereffect we detected was the lingering spell M seemed to have cast on the coffee wholesaler whose stock we had adulterated. Shortly after the test, he phoned his sister in Texas and told her about a woman he'd met on a recent Sunday after church. They had hit it off in a big way. She had a precocious little girl who after only two days was calling him Uncle Duane. Uncle Duane was perplexed when all of a sudden his two special girls left town without so much as a good-bye, and he wondered if they were in any kind of trouble.

A year later he continued to wonder, in rambling weekly calls to his sister. And I was unhappy with M about involving her kid in an operation.

Time passed, and Project Phone Home burbled along. Prof. Mellow was making great strides in realizing two of our requirements for *Ambrosia osamum*. First, the drug was to accumulate not in the ragweed leaf or

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flower but on the surface of its pollen, where it could be readily absorbed by the mucous membranes of the eyes and nose. Second, the TC genes were to be expressed only in the first generation of ragweed plants. After that they turned themselves off. The last thing we wanted was for this guiltweed to get away from us and spread to wild plants. Unlike Prof. Mellow with his pet dandelions, the ACC is opposed to letting GM Frankensteins loose. We're patriots, not God.

When the time came for human trials, the prof rounded up volunteers among the greenhouse workers. The results were positive: red, runny noses; itchy eyes; and inflamed consciences.

THEN SOME BAD NEWS arrived to spoil the mood. The civilian researchers from the army TC project were being called in for lengthy interviews. We felt pretty confident about our contact, since her neck was on the same block as ours. But there was the possibility the army might interview her with the help of the drug itself. M and C had become compromised.

On top of that, Uncle Duane was still obsessing about M. By now she and the kid were the lost loves of his life, and he posted photos of them on Flickr and on sites for missing and exploited children. Worse, his sister in Texas had persuaded him to hire a detective, for his own peace of mind.

It was only a matter of time before Duane and the army bumped into each other, so in accordance with ACC firewall protocol, the core group ordered me to contain the damage. With prejudice, if necessary. I thought long and hard about how best to accomplish this. We could hardly strong-arm Uncle Duane at that point, and we sure couldn't stop the army. Seeing no alternative, with or without prejudice, I called my go-to team together and broke the bad news. M was off the team, permanently. She should never have involved the kid. I told them that at the conclusion of the meeting, I would be escorting M and daughter to a safe house, where a relocation specialist would pick them up. M was to have cosmetic surgery and, just as important, a voice change. The ACC would cover all costs, including a monthly stipend. And a cash bonus when the bastard was captured or killed. But there would be no further contact between her and any of us, ever. B took it the worst, but the whole team was troubled. M

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said she knew she had screwed up royal but didn't want to put her daughter through a life on the run and asked if she could leave her with Granny. I said that was probably not such a hot idea, since the kid could ID us all. Besides, if she left her kid she would be miserable, and the kid would be miserable. In the end, my reasoning prevailed, and M and the team made their last farewells. M's parting words were "I'm gonna watch the news every night, and when we win, I'm going to raise a glass to all of you. God bless and good-bye."

I drove M to pick up the kid, then to their place to pack, and then on to the first leg of their brave new life.

During the next two years, work on Project Phone Home proceeded smoothly. There were no further signs of the army or anyone else on our tail. Meanwhile, the ACC developed several backup plans for locating bin Laden, and my go-tos were engaged in implementing them.

Seed day. We made final prep for handing off the GM ragweed to an expat in time for spring sowing in the lush valleys of northwest Pakistan. Six hundred hermetically sealed bags, fifty pounds each, of washed seed. I had sent C to the greenhouses to guarantee a pollen-free shipment. Some deluded soul over there, possibly Prof. Mellow high on dandelions, had plastered the shipping pallets with "Hillary in '08" stickers.

Our immediate task was to double-bag the shipment in USAID-imprinted gunnysacks and transship it to a dummy agri-coöp in Peshawar as high-yield rye seed, which it resembled. Taking no chances, I had linemen rig up an industrial HEPA-filtered ventilation hood in the warehouse for us to work under. And I made my crew wear full hazmat gear. It was heavy work, and despite the January night and unheated warehouse, we fogged up our face masks with the effort.

We finished at dawn, and after cleaning up and disposing of used filters, I sent the crew home. B and G waited with me for the freight company to pick up the seeds and a final pallet of phones, and then we went to an IHOP for breakfast.

We were in a celebratory mood; this marked the completion of our part in the vox-cutter project. From then on its success was up to strangers. We wolfed down a breakfast of cakes, eggs, and sausages. We proposed

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toasts with orange juice and coffee. G toasted to Operation Ragweed for Ragheads. B toasted to M and her kid, wherever they were and whoever they had become.

When the waitress came over with more coffee, she said, "I know it's petty of me and wrong, but I resent happy people like you." She spoke calmly, refilled our cups, and went away.

We gaped at each other. I stood up to peer over the booth partitions and saw patrons crying into their phones. We left immediately. The woman at the register told us how sometimes she pilfered from the tip jar. Her eyes and nose were not inflamed, so whatever vector was involved in dispersing the TC, it wasn't our pollen. On the sidewalk outside, a guy on a mountain bike and a woman with a shopping cart were trying to unburden themselves to each other. So it probably wasn't the coffee or restaurant food either. In fact, all up and down the street we saw penitents fessing up to one another.

G craned his neck and peered into the sky. "Aerial spraying?" he said. "An area-wide dragnet?" We wondered if we were the target. But we didn't stick around to find out.

A woman was slumped against the bumper of our car. She looked at us and said, "Is this all I get?" I helped her to her feet. "I mean, I know I'm ugly. I've known that since I was a child, but does it mean my life has to be so small and empty and meaningless?"

I turned her toward the intersection and told her to find a taxi and go home. And if she had a phone, to use it.

We jumped into the car, G behind the wheel. "Where to?" he yelled, pulling into traffic.

I told him to drive back to the warehouse. No matter how the TC was being dispersed, our hazmat gear there had protected us. My plan was for us to suit up before evacuating the area. Then my phone rang, a call from C. I asked him where he was.

He said, "I feel like telling you that ten years ago I acquired a complete microfiche set of engineering plans for the Trans-Alaska Pipeline."

"I don't care about that. Where are you?"

"At the warehouse. Listen, I sold the plans for a shitload of money. You want to know who to?"

I ordered him to destroy his phone and stay put till someone came for

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him. Then I hung up and told G to forget the warehouse and head for the bridge instead. He made a sharp U-turn and nearly hit an SUV. He had to brake so hard he stalled the engine. But instead of restarting it, he just sat there staring out the windshield. In the back seat, B said, "They showed us color photos of aborted fetuses. They said a baby as old as mine already had perfect little fingernails."

I ordered her to shut up and Gus to drive, but he turned around in his seat and said, "I saw my father kill my mother, and I lied to the police about it."

"Drive! Drive!"

"I was only five years old. He made it out to look like an accident, but he never fooled me."

I ordered them to hand over their cell phones, but Bella dialed a number, and as it rang she told us, "And perfect little eyelashes." When her party answered, she began to weep.

"Stop crying!" I barked at her. But she didn't stop, and Gus joined her. A sight to behold — Gus Ostermann pressing the heels of his hands against his temples. "All the poor dogs!" he cried. "And all the poor cats."

We sat there for a long time, traffic piling up and passing around us as we talked to the people we loved. Before army intelligence arrived, I received a text message from the ACC. A single word, backed by the authority of the core group — "JUG." Short for jugulate, which was what they were directing me to do in order to protect the ACC. I couldn't allow us to be taken alive, that much was clear. I have sworn an oath to lay down my life for the group, and I will, only not right now. Right now I actually feel like answering a few questions.

My name is William B. Boothtipple. My number is 973-555-0979. If it's busy, leave voice mail or keep trying; no doubt I'm on the other line spilling my guts.

And now some shout-outs:

— To Melody and her awesome kid, Kimmie, wherever you are and whoever you've become. Duane wasn't the only one you bewitched; I think of you guys all the time. If I had known how much I'd miss you, I would never have let you go.

— To Osama. Hey, man, seriously, phone home. It's been years since they've heard your voice, and everyone's worried sick.

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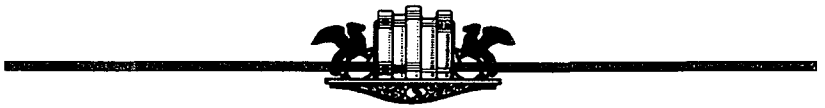

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Accidental Time Machine, by Joe Haldeman, Ace, 2007, $23.95.

WHEN I'M in the mood for some good hard sf, nothing makes me happier than to have a new Joe Haldeman book on hand. He's such a treasure in this genre. In a Haldeman book, you always get great characters, real honest-to-goodness fresh speculative ideas, and a story worthy enough to hold the two together. I can't remember ever being disappointed by one of his books, and there aren't many writers of whom I can say that — in or out of the genre.

With my fondness for time travel stories, I was particularly delighted with this latest novel of his.

Of course, Haldeman being Haldeman, you don't get a traditional time travel story. His character makes jumps into the future rather than to the past: small ones at first — so small that they're barely noticeable — but the time and distance grows exponentially with each trip, so soon we're in the far far future.

It begins when Matt Fuller, a research assistant at MIT, accidentally puts together a simple calibrator that disappears when he hits the reset button, only to reappear a second later. With a little experimentation and calculation, Fuller discovers that every time he hits the reset button, the machine goes missing twelve times longer than the time before.

Fuller's not at a good point in his life. His girlfriend has dumped him and he's lost his job (to the guy his girlfriend dumped him for), so he figures he has nothing to lose by testing the machine on himself. He borrows a vintage car from a local drug dealer, stocks it with provisions and the pet-store turtle on which he first tried the machine, and sends himself into the future — where he's arrested for the murder

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of the car's owner who dropped dead when his vehicle disappeared before his eyes.

So Fuller does the only thing he can: he uses the machine to go further into the future.

The futures he visits are more commentaries on present day society, rather than Haldeman's trying to predict what the future will actually be like. But the science sounds good, and using other worlds to comment on one's present is a viable, informative, and entertaining literary device with roots that go back to Jonathan Swift, and probably further. And like the best of such literary forerunners, Haldeman doesn't sacrifice story or character to make his points.

The Accidental Time Machine is first and foremost a terrific sf adventure story. Everything else is just icing on an already delicious cake.

Blaze, by Richard Bachman (Stephen King), Scribner, 2007, $25.

It's hard to imagine that an author as prolific as Stephen King, with as many books as he has published, could have one more trunk novel lying around, but according to his foreword, that's what *Blaze* is. What I don't understand is King's somewhat apologetic introduction to it in that same foreword.

Because this is an absolute delight of a book. It's a tragedy (in the classical sense of the word), yes, though it couldn't be anything but, given the lead character, his background, and the story. Still, it ranks among my favorite King stories, ones like "The Body," "Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption," *The Green Mile*, *Hearts in Atlantis*, and the recent *The Colorado Kid*.

I really like it when King tells a smaller story, when he gets right into some little corner of the world as seen by one individual.

Here that individual is Clayton Blaisdell, Jr., known as Blaze. We meet him talking to his dead partner George (who could be a real ghost, could be just in Blaze's head — the reader has to decide), vowing to pull off the one last score that they'd been planning since before George died: the kidnapping of a baby heir worth millions.

The story goes back and forth between the kidnapping and Blaze's youth, both storylines equally compelling, both enriching the other.

As a kid, Blaze's father threw him down the stairs to land on his head, then threw him down again. Blaze grows up slow-minded, a huge

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bulk of a kid who grows into a giant of a man with a big dent in his skull. He is formed by his years being raised by the state, but never loses the sweetness that lies at his heart. When he goes wrong, it's because those around him — particularly George, whose name recalls George Milton of *Of Mice and Men* — use him in their criminal schemes.

Blaze never really cared one way or another about his misdemeanors. But then he meets George, someone who, for the first time, accepts him as an equal. Who trusts him and treats him fairly. We know, as readers peering between the lines, that George isn't as altruistic as Blaze thinks he is, but it would be impossible to convince Blaze otherwise.

By the time you're a third of the way into the book, you completely understand how this gentle giant could go through with the kidnapping plan. The oddest thing is how, you're sort of rooting for him, even though what he's doing is utterly and inexcusably wrong.

Therein the tragedy.

King's writing is restrained throughout, but this isn't a story that needs the big scares or gross-outs to be powerful. And as it barrels along to its inevitable conclusion, you can't condone Blaze's actions, but you sure wish things could turn out otherwise. That the simple, sweet boy he was could have had a chance to have a larger life than the narrow confines of the one he was given.

This might be a trunk novel, revised and updated, but King has nothing to be embarrassed about because it really does rank among his best books.

Strays, by Ron Koertge, Candlewick Press, 2007, $16.99.

"So where are you staying?" the dog asks.

"With some people who take care of strays."

"Like the pound?"

"Kind of."

This is easily one of my favorite books so far for this year. It's a slender exploration of a kid dealing with the death of his parents and having to go into state-run foster homes. He's a bit of a loser — was never liked at his old school, he's awkward and uncomfortable around his peers, and because his parents ran a pet store, he was made the brunt of many jokes about smelling like animals and the like. He doesn't expect anything to change just because he's going to a new school, even though nobody there knows anything about him.

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Oh, and he can talk to animals, and they talk back to him.

While the quick plot synopsis above makes this sound like a downer of a book, it's really anything but. And I don't mean that it's some after-school, feel-good movie-of-the-week take on a difficult subject either.

Here's what I loved about the book:

Though sixteen-year-old Ted O'Connor is a loser, Koertge writes him with such skill that we have sympathy, rather than impatience, with his situation. We genuinely like him and root for him, even when he doesn't stand up for himself the way we want him to. And the character always feels real — from the usual teen anxieties, to how he's dealing with his parents' death; parents who argued a lot and while they obviously cared for him, worked him hard in the pet store and never saw how unhappy his life was.

The prose is a delight: lean, but without a nuance missing, while the dialogue crackles with authenticity without ever falling into the easy predictability of the so-called "authentic" dialogue you might hear on a TV show. This is the way kids talk and interact with each other, and it's beautifully portrayed.

But it's how Koertge handles Ted's ability to communicate with animals that sets this book above so many of its peers, and I recommend it to all new fantasy writers (and established ones, too) to see how well this can be done. It's never twee, it's never rationalized, it's not in his head, and how it plays into the end of the book is an absolutely brilliant analogy of the passage from childhood to adulthood.

There are other things that I loved about this book — many other things, subtle nuances, great narrative choices — but frankly, I'd rather you discovered them on your own.

While I suppose this is aimed at a YA audience, it's really just a book with a young protagonist that I think anyone, of any age, will appreciate and enjoy.

Very highly recommended.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Musing on Books

Michelle West

The Name of the Wind, by Patrick Rothfuss, DAW, 2007, $24.99.

Thirteen, by Richard Morgan, Del Rey, 2007, $24.99.

I'M SURE you're all familiar with reader fatigue. It's the malaise that causes you to glance at a book, sigh, and put it down, having skimmed perhaps the back cover blurb or the inside flap, without any interest at all in the words that have managed to penetrate the fog. It feels a little like boredom, but is more accurately the inability to engage with the printed page. In general, we blame this on the book, or what we assume the book is about — which is to say, the same-old, same-old.

Any type of book, any genre, can engender this feeling, and when caught in its grip, the reader approaches everything with a somewhat jaded eye. At its worst, it can cause you to forget why exactly it is you want to read in the first place.

Let me make this clear: I used to place blame on the books, but I've come to realize it's probably me. I'm feeling somewhat jaded, and I want something, but my ability to engage with text at this point is rather minimal. When I'm in this mood, I've given up on looking for emotional delight. Or emotional anything, really. If the words fail to somehow grab me, I move on, restlessly grazing. (No, I'm not going to carry that particular analogy any further.)

But *if* a book I approach with a certain sense of gloom does somehow manage to catch the attention that is already flagging before I've turned to page one, it feels like a revelation. And if it continues to hold me, or surprise me, if it gets under my rather thick skin in some way, it reminds me of *why* I read in the first place.

So: this month's column, and the two very different books herein.

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There seems to be some general agreement that a book should start in the middle of action, should move quickly, should be easily absorbed. But Rothfuss's opening scene, a one-page prologue, does the opposite. There is no action; there is, rather, description of inaction, of, in fact, silence. And the silence takes place in a quiet, under-populated inn. It's all nuance.

The inn is owned by Kote; his single employee is Bast. And into the lives of these two men comes the Chronicler, a man who's made it his life to discover — and write — the truth. The Chronicler is looking for Kvothe, the Kingkiller. He isn't blind and he isn't a man who reveres myth. He knows that the truth is both less than myth, and in some complicated way, more. He understands people, and in some way, he understands *how* to get them to talk to him. And if Kote is at first reluctant to speak of the past, in the end, he relents, and in relenting, he gives us the book: The first day of the Kingkiller Chronicles. Because Kote is, of course, the Kvothe of myth.

Rothfuss's writing is enough to make me weep. I want to say with envy, but I think most writers come to writing through reading, and it is impossible, in the end, not to read Rothfuss as a reader; to be drawn into his story, and Kvothe's; to see the present as it is, and the past as it unfolds. He takes his time, and he draws his characters — bit players and central figures — with care. No voice is the same, and no voice seems to speak from some authorial dictate. Even the backstory of the world is filtered through the men who come to the tavern night after night. They are both familiar tropes and distinctive characters.

Kvothe was born to the Ruh, a traveling troupe of actors who had, among their many viewers, high nobility and commoners alike. He was educated, and learned to read, to write, and above all to question. He was quick but young, and always a bit odd. He might have remained in ignorance of magic if not for a chance encounter with an Arcanist who would eventually join the Ruh in their travels. Abenthy becomes the first of his many teachers. And Kvothe learns quickly.

Magic is a lot like math, in Rothfuss's world — or at least the beginnings of it are. This frustrates Kvothe a great deal, because in his dreams, magic is myth, and he, like any child, wants to be larger than life.

But there *is* magic, in Rothfuss's

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world; there is the inexplicable wildness of a power that is not confined to normal life or thought; there is history, and tragedy, in a past that is only remembered in story or song, and perhaps not even then. And Kvothe will chase it, for different reasons, throughout the course of his early life. That life starts on the open road and winds its way toward the city in which the University lies waiting.

I want to say more about that life, but I can't do it justice, and although I don't care about spoilers at all, many of you do. Suffice it to say that any plot synopsis of the story would do it such a grave injustice that I'm not even tempted to try.

Most of the book is a first person narrative because most of the book is Kvothe's account, as told to the Chronicler.

You could tell *a* story in a much smaller number of pages. But you couldn't tell *this* story with this much grace or power. Rothfuss reminds me not only of why I read, but why I keep returning to High Fantasy — I'm looking for books like *Name of the Wind*.

The Richard Morgan novel is nothing at all like the Rothfuss. Where Rothfuss is graceful and nuanced, Morgan is like a slap in the face. Or ten. His writing is sharp, edgy, visceral. His characters are almost entirely free of sentiment. His world has that kind of worn, run-down feel that was captured so successfully on screen in *Bladerunner*.

I admit that had anyone told me what this novel was about before I picked it up, I would have passed. And I also admit that, had the Canadian/UK edition title of the novel not been *Black Man*, I probably wouldn't have picked it up. My first thought when I was unpacking the book in the store was, "that's a brave title." My second thought was, "Maybe it's not as political a statement as it seems." And my third was, "Oh, yes it is."

I started at the beginning, because I sometimes do that, and my reaction was: "Psycho-killer with questionable sanity on a spaceship." I don't in general read serial killer novels. I don't in general read horror novels. The opening to this one felt like both. But I was curious. The reading for the first few pages was entirely an intellectual exercise. I wanted to see where the book went.

It went two places.

To Carl Marsalis, the Black Man of the title, a genetically modified

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human known, in Morgan's future, as a variant thirteen. Created to be a soldier and raised to become a sociopath, Marsalis, like all variant thirteens, was given a choice when the war was over: Ship out to Mars or live on Earth in quarantine in a concentration camp. He shipped out to Mars.

And won a lottery back. He's now employed by UNGLA, the future United Nations, and he's sent to track down rogue variant thirteens, and either turn them over to the aforementioned camps, or, more often the outcome, kill them.

It's a living.

But his living in Jesusland — or the United Republic — is about to be cut short by a sting operation, and he winds up in jail. This doesn't have a lot to do with the book's opening. There *is* an investigation into a shuttle that's landed in the water. The shuttle is the property of COLIN, and the COLIN investigative team, Tom Norton and Sevgi Ertekin, have come to look at the scene of the slaughter.

Sevgi, aware that there are malfunctions with the capsules that are supposed to keep travelers in deep sleep for the length of a very long and very tedious voyage, takes one look at the data, and very clearly points out that the cannibalism is not necessarily the act of a crazed lunatic — someone woke up, and someone needed to eat. He chose the only edible or harvestable food on the ship.

Okay, I admit by this point, the intellectual triggers had fired, and while I was still reading the book with a sense of curiosity about what Morgan was doing with his beginnings, I was probably now committed to at least finishing the novel. I also thought, "If Morgan stripped out the SFnal elements of this book, he'd make a million dollars writing high tech thrillers." (I was totally wrong. He can't strip them out; the characters are a product of their context, and it's wed to those elements.)

The novel draws Sevgi and Marsalis together because the perpetrator of a series of crimes that are *also* being investigated is a variant thirteen.

All of the elements of the book are related. Marsalis intends to take a flyer when they drag him out of jail and onto the job. He doesn't intend to get involved with the COLIN investigation, because once he's out of Florida and in the Rim States, UNGLA has greater authority, and he can get himself picked up and returned to what passes for home.

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But...he doesn't. He starts to play at investigating because Sevgi *knows* he doesn't intend to stick around, and he's curious. He asks to see VR footage of the crime scene of one of the murders, and as he's walked through the reconstruction of probable events, he calls a halt and tells them what he's pretty certain happened — but it's not the same as their reconstruction, except that both versions end in the death of the victim.

And somewhere in the tangle of interaction between Sevgi and Marsalis, I got lost — in a good way. I started to care about the characters, to see them as people, and more important, to see them as people that, against expectation, I really cared about. Somewhere in the middle of the book the switch flipped and I could not put the book down until I'd finished it. And started it again. And finished it again.

I *adored* this book. It made me wince several times, it made me laugh out loud at least three times, it made me weep, *and* it surprised me. It was *not* a light read, and I think some people will have problems with the level of violence, but Morgan can be surprising in his subtlety — possibly because on the surface, there *isn't* any.

I started writing this review with an eye to all the slightly more academic things that make it good — structure, writing, pacing, world-building. But in this particular case, while all those things are true, they're almost an excuse for liking the book, so I took them all out and that left me with my reactions, reading it.

This is the first Richard K. Morgan novel I've read, but it definitely won't be the last — because I read for character, and he understands people. I think in some grudging way, given the cynicism of his universe, he even likes them, and when all is said and done, I will read anything if you can make me care about the characters.

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Ben Rosenbaum reports that in addition to a forthcoming collection of short stories (as yet untitled, but due out in May), he has also had a big part in an art project called "Anthroptic," which will open in New York City on October 13 (more information should be available at http://thepresentgroup.com/info/*)*

David Ackert is an actor who also worked on "Anthroptic." His other work includes the films Suckers *and* Cool Crime, *a short film entitled* Blue Plate *that he also produced, and parts on television shows such as* CSI: Miami *and* JAG. *He is currently producing and appearing in a documentary entitled* Voices of Uganda.

Their first collaboration is a subtle and potent story that reads like it may be the start of a larger work.

Stray

By Benjamin Rosenbaum and David Ackert

SHE'D FOUND HIM BY THE side of the road: Ivan, who had been prince of the immortals, lying in the long grass. Ivan, against whose knees weeping kings had laid their cheeks; who had collected popes, khans, prophets, martyrs, minstrels, whores, revolutionaries, poets, anarchists, and industrial magnates; who could send armies into the sea with a movement of his hand.

She'd stopped her Model T where he lay by the side of the road. He was shell-shocked, marooned at the end of one kind of life, an empty carapace, soul-dry. There were a million drifters and Okies and ruined men cluttering the gutters of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's America; and Muriel had taken him for a white man at first. Colored doctor's daughter stopping for what looked like a white hobo; the wild danger of that. On that improbable fulcrum, his life had turned.

He'd told her what he was. She was a mortal; of course she was afraid. But she'd listened; and at the end of that long, mad tale, she'd gotten up

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from her cedar kitchen table, cleared the teacups, washed them in the sink and dried her hands.

"I believe you," she'd said, and some strange sweet leviathan had moved through the dark water within him. He'd studied the grain of the polished cedar wood, not meeting her eyes. She was like a glass he was afraid of dropping. But even without looking, every creak of the floorboards, every clink of the dishes told him: stay.

The wedding had been a long Sunday in June. The church was bright, with thick white paint over the boards. It seated forty, squeezed together on pine benches — two rows of out-of-town relatives and Muriel's father's old patients had to stand in the back. There was potato salad and coleslaw and grits and greens on the benches outside. The rich smell of the barbecue, the smoke from the grill. Mosquitoes dancing in the afternoon light.

Muriel smiling and crying and laughing. With Muriel set into the center of his world like a jewel, Ivan was home; when she touched his hand, his enemies became God's wounded children, his centuries of pain and crime a fireside tale to wonder at. In her embrace, Ivan's bitter knowledge was refuted. He was a fool in a garden.

Without her, the world was a desert of evil beings.

And he was full of fear — full of fear, that she would go.

Aunt Gertrude was saying, "No no no, the Monroes, from the *other* side of the family, you know — I think they out in Kansas. Very respectable. Well let me tell you *this*, child — I knew that man was perfect for Muriel *before* she told me he was family. The moment I laid eyes...."

The women fluttered about Ivan and fussed at him. The men tried out their jokes and stories on him. He nodded and laughed, and watched what their bodies told each other. Yes, he was an out-of-towner, strange, his past unknown; drifter, some said, the kind you want to keep on moving past your town. But that kind settled down sometimes — now look how hard he worked at the mill, when there was work. And she was so happy, look how happy she was. And you know that's what Muriel needed to be satisfied: someone with an air of strangeness, like this green-eyed ageless second cousin who had probably been in the Great War.

And he hadn't pulled any of his puppeteer's strings. Not one. All on their own, they had chosen him.

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Except Li'l Wallace.

Li'l Wallace was polite. He complimented Muriel's dress and he told the men the one about the sailor and the Dutchman. But to Ivan, the man's thoughts were as loud as a siren: How had this stranger, this high yellow "second cousin" with city manners and slippery ways, won Muriel? Li'l Wallace was strong and good-looking and a steady day-shift man at the mill, and he was from around here. Sure, he was dark, but he couldn't believe all Muriel wanted was a light-skinned man! After ten years of patient and chivalrous wooing, he had a right to the heart of the doctor's daughter. He couldn't fathom how the stranger had gotten by him.

All through the reception, Li'l Wallace's eyes tracked across Ivan's face, hands, clothes, looking for a weakness. Ivan squirmed. It would be so easy: to shift the cadence of his voice to match Li'l Wallace's; to hold his shoulders in a certain way that would remind Li'l Wallace of his dead brother; to be silent at the right moment, then say the words Li'l Wallace was thinking; so that Li'l Wallace would feel suddenly an unreasonable rush of affection for him, would grin, shake his head ruefully, give up his desire for Muriel and love Ivan.

Ivan felt like a cripple. Like a man trying to feed himself with a fork held in his toes. And he was afraid. Eventually, Li'l Wallace would find something out of place. What if he found out enough to hate and fear Ivan? To turn these people against him? Part of Ivan seethed with rage that any human would look at him with those suspicious eyes. How good it would feel to turn that resentment and suspicion, in an instant, to adoration.

But if Ivan was going to be human, to be here, he would have to leave the puppeteer's strings alone.

Ivan had been sitting on a picnic bench in the churchyard, smearing his last piece of cornbread into the cooling dabs of gravy, when Li'l Wallace approached.

"You smoke?"

Ivan blinked up at him. What was this? "I have," he said. He watched the resentment and mistrust brewing in the mortal, calculating its trajectory, aching to banish it.

"Good," Li'l Wallace said, and pressed something small, square, and cold into Ivan's hand. Then nodded, and walked away.

Ivan looked at the lighter. And up at Li'l Wallace's retreating back,

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and in it, the decision, simple and sweet: that Muriel deserved to be happy.

A shiver raced through Ivan's body. He thought: this human has surprised me. This human has surprised me! Ivan's heart beat large within him and he looked up at Muriel in her white dress, swinging a niece in slow circles in the air. How can this be?

And then Ivan answered himself: because in ten thousand years, this is what you have never seen: what happens, what they choose, if only you leave them alone.

There were moments when he suddenly felt lost in this new life. Sitting by the pond with Li'l Wallace, a checkerboard between them, throwing bread to the ducks, his heart would abruptly begin to race and he would think, what am I doing here? I am wasting time, there is something terribly important I must do, and first of all I must take this human — make sure he is mine, under my control, safe. He'd squeeze his eyes shut and wait for the feeling to pass.

Or he'd be in a church pew singing David's psalms and be overcome with a memory: walking through a walled city to the court of a hill-country half-nomad potentate, asses braying in the evening, a crowd of slaves falling onto their bellies before him. Scowling at the princes and lords in disgust — this one too passive, this one low and mean, this one dissolute, none of them souls he'd want pressed close to him. And then turning to see the hard eyes and wild grin of the minstrel boy sitting in the corner with a harp in his goatherd's hands. Thinking: ah, yes. You. On you I will build an empire, and a path to God. Whatever you were before, now you are mine; now you are the arrow that pierces Heaven. And seeing the yearning begin in the boy's eyes, the yearning that would never end, that only Ivan could fulfill.

And in the middle of the mill floor, a fifty-pound sack of flour on one shoulder, Ivan would stop, remembering the shadow the roach cast. After he'd feasted on a hundred centuries of human devotion and need, when he was full of power and empty of fear, he'd forced his way past the Last Door of Dream. And beyond the door, where he'd expected answers and angels — in that terrible light, he'd seen a roach skittering across a wall. And he'd known that that automaton, that empty dead machine creeping on and on and on over the bodies of the dead — that insect was Ivan.

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He'd burned his castle. Burned his library of relics — the jade knife that killed this one, the lock of that one's hair. Abandoned his living prizes to madness. He'd vanished into a Europe descending into hell: walked through fields of corpses amidst the whistling of shells, on dusty roads by the tinkling and bleating of starving goats. Stared at the blue walls of the sanitorium, seeing the eyes of all those he'd taken. A wall of eyes in darkness. Years that were all one long moment of terror and rage and shame, before he'd crossed the Atlantic.

Now, when it came upon him, he shouldered the bag and moved his feet. One, then the other. Watched the men at their work of stacking, looked at each one, whispering their names. That's Henry. That's Roy. That's Li'l Wallace. Thought of Muriel waiting at home. Of ham and collard greens. Coffee. Checkers. Lucky Strikes.

The eyes still watched him, from their wall.

IVAN LOVED positioning the checkers, sacrificing one to save another, cornering, crowning, collecting. He loved pretending to make a stupid mistake, giving his last piece to Li'l Wallace with a show of effort and disappointment. And if Ivan kept his eyes carefully on the ducks in the pond and hummed a song from the radio silently to himself, sometimes he could distract himself enough that Li'l Wallace's moves would actually surprise him.

The sun was touching the horizon now. Li'l Wallace finished his smoke and handed the lighter back to Ivan. "How's married life?"

"Can't complain," Ivan said, and looked over at Li'l Wallace. The question was guileless, friendly. But Ivan felt uneasy.

"I guess y'all gon' be working on children now," Li'l Wallace said with an easy smile, his eyes on the lake.

Blood rushed to Ivan's face and he turned away. He closed his eyes and remembered Muriel crying in the kitchen. "Shush," she'd said, pushing him away, "shush, Ivan, yes, I *knew*, I know what life I chose, now you just let me be, you let me be." Her cheeks glistening, the bedroom door slamming. (And he could make her laugh again, make her happy again, instantly, so easily! He'd closed his eyes, knowing where that road led: a madman in an empty palace, a lock of hair in a ribbon, burning.)

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Ivan heard Li'l Wallace shift in his chair.

So there you are, you bastard, Ivan thought. You were right all along. You are the right one for Muriel. You could have given her a real life, a real family. I can only give her a parody.

He opened his eyes and saw, in Li'l Wallace's, only compassion.

And that was too much for Ivan to bear. He pushed himself out of his chair and headed for the woods. Li'l Wallace said something; Ivan kept walking. He didn't speak, he didn't gesture. He didn't trust what he might do to Li'l Wallace if he did.

Ivan pissed against a tree, buttoned up, and walked deeper into the woods, toward the abandoned graveyard at its heart. He slowed his heartbeat and watched the shadows among the leaves. Then, at the graveyard's edge, he saw the girl.

She had dirty blonde hair and wore a dress stitched from old calico rags. She was about eleven years old. She knelt in the dirt, her eyes closed, framed in the sun's last light filtering green through the trees. She was praying. Her lips moved, clumsy, honest. There were tears on her cheeks.

Ivan felt her prayer, like a beam piercing through the veil. That veil that had been like a wall of stone for him, that door he had opened at such cost, was like a cobweb to her. She was whispering in God's ear.

Ivan shifted his posture to become a white man, made himself calm, comforting. He knelt by her and put his hand on her shoulder. She opened her eyes but she was not startled. She smiled at him.

"I'm Ivan. What's your name?"

"Sarah," said the girl.

She bit her lip. The question she was expecting was, what are you doing out in these woods alone? Instead he asked: "What are you praying for?"

Sarah drew in a deep and shuddering breath, but she didn't cry. "I live with my sick grandma. When she dies, I'll be alone. Ain't nobody else to take me in. But I'm not afraid. I'm not afraid. God's gonna' send someone."

Ivan stroked his hand across her hair. This girl's eyes were a speckled blue. And yet their shape was so familiar. Where had he seen them before? He wondered if a little manipulation in a good cause might be permitted him. Surely he could arrange for a family of whites to take her in. Maybe he would ask Muriel to bend their rules. Maybe —

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There was a crunch of boots on leaves in the forest behind him. "Ivan?" Li'l Wallace said.

Ivan jumped up. Damn, damn, he'd been lost in the little girl's eyes. Sarah looked wildly around. Li'l Wallace stared at them and frowned. They were both looking at him, and there was no time.

Maybe he could have crafted a way to look that would have set them both at ease. In the old days, when he was powerful. But he was so tired now, and he couldn't risk losing his new home. So he looked as Li'l Wallace expected him to — Negro.

The girl screamed.

"Oh my God!" she shouted. She stumbled back against a gravestone and grabbed at her hair where Ivan had touched it. "You're a *nigger*! Oh my God, no, you're gonna — "

Li'l Wallace hissed in breath, and in it Ivan heard their future. The girl running, crying, found on the road, her imagination feverish. Torches. Guns. Dogs. Crosses of fire. Li'l Wallace's feet kicking in the air, kicking, finding no purchase, nowhere to stand.

Sarah drew another breath to scream and —

Ivan took her.

She ran to him and collapsed into his arms, buried her face against his stomach, sobbing. Ivan lifted her up gently, nestled her face against his neck.

For Li'l Wallace's benefit, he said, "Shush now, little miss, you know no one gonna hurt you here, we're decent folk here, no one gonna treat you with any disrespect, come now, Ivan's gonna take you back to your home."

And when he looked up into Li'l Wallace's eyes, suspicion and fear were fading. Li'l Wallace blinked and smiled uneasily and let a breath out. His eyes said: you handled that well. I hope.

Ivan nodded and walked back toward the pond. Li'l Wallace stood behind him, uncertain whether to follow, and Ivan said, "I'll see you tomorrow, brother."

The brown duck quacked at him by the side of the pond. Wanting bread. But he had no bread left. Sarah's little body was warm and light against his. He leaned his head back a little to look in her eyes. She would follow him anywhere. She didn't care if he was white or black. He was her sent angel.

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Ivan felt the sting of tears.

Could it be different, this time? What if there was no shaping, no manipulation, no harvesting; what if he gardened her soul, not for himself, but for her? She was his now: very well, he would be hers. His heart was racing; he felt her total attention, the silence in her mind, the way the collected clear themselves away to make room for the master's will, and it sickened him. He could cherish her, like a daughter. Would it bring her back to herself? He'd freed prizes before, abandoned them to collapse into madness. Not this time. Too late to turn back. He steeled himself: this time there would be only love, a father's love!

He put Sarah on her feet as they approached the porch steps. She leaned in toward him, inhaled the scent of him as it breezed off his shirt, his jacket, his skin. He looked down at her, scratching his jaw, and opened the door.

"Muriel?" he called in, escorting the girl inside. He sat Sarah down at the kitchen table and scooped generous curls of ice cream into a bowl. He heard Muriel coming down the stairs as he handed Sarah a spoon.

Muriel stopped when she saw the girl. She had not expected a third person in the house. The two of them locked eyes.

"This here is our new friend, Sarah," Ivan said.

"Hello, Sarah." Muriel nodded, a nod of extreme politeness, a nod in which no one could find any insolence at all. Her spine was knotted tense. She looked around the room at the chairs, wondering if she should sit down. Smiled broadly. Tried not to wonder where this girl's people were, if they were looking for her, what they would do if they found her here. Trying to trust Ivan. Just a little girl eating ice cream, Ivan saw Muriel tell herself, trying not to think of torches and dogs.

Sarah shrank back a little. She glanced at Ivan, looking for some cue or instruction. She found it in his expression and put down the spoon.

"I don't mean to be any bother, ma'am. Your husband was kind enough to help me after I took a fall on the road. He kept saying nice things about you and so we thought I might like to meet you is all." Sarah sparkled at her hostess. Her smile was warm and innocent, smudged with vanilla.

"Oh," Muriel said, relaxing a little. "Of course." She stepped forward and opened the napkin drawer. "Well, you're certainly welcome here."

Sarah flicked a look back to Ivan. He smiled to reassure her. Well

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done, little one. We will convince my Muriel. She needs a little time for these fears of hers, fears from the world beyond this house. They don't belong in this house anymore; they don't matter now.

Sarah stroked her chin, mock serious.

"Now if I had to guess, I'd say you made this delicious ice cream yourself, am I right, ma'am?"

Muriel laughed and turned back to the girl. "Oh yes, and it's kind of you to...." She stopped and looked at Ivan. He realized he was stroking his chin in exactly the same way, and jerked his hand from his face. Muriel handed the girl a checkered napkin. "Sarah, would you excuse us for a minute?"

Sarah did not move. Not until Ivan dismissed her. Then she collected her bowl, flashed a jealous glance in Muriel's direction, and went out to the porch.

Muriel waited until she heard the screen door swing shut. "Ivan, what in Heaven's name is going on here?"

"I'm sorry, Muriel," he said.

Maybe Muriel hadn't believed Ivan's stories until now, not all the way. She'd listened attentively to all he told her about what he was, what he had been, while she fell in love with him. But for her it was just a bad old life he'd led, as if she'd married a man who had fought his way up from being a back-alley drunk. She hadn't thought too much about the people he'd left behind. "You're *sorry*?"

"I just wanted to talk to her, Muriel — I was curious, and then — she was in a bad way, and I thought we could help her — " He gritted his teeth with the effort of leaving alone the tension knotting the muscles of Muriel's neck, the panic in her eyes. A mortal man would soothe her, wouldn't he? Li'l Wallace would soothe her. But where was the line? Did he err, in keeping his face flat, his movements drained of their power to unravel her fear? She turned her face away. "Li'l Wallace came up and I had to be Negro again. The child panicked, so I...I had to...."

"How could you?" Muriel whispered.

"Muriel, it ain't like that. I don't want a prize or a tool. It's — it was just — the girl's about to be orphaned. We could...she needs us."

"You promised me, Ivan." Muriel whispered. It burned like a bullet through Ivan's heart.

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"Muriel, I know it was wrong. But it's done. We can do this with love, Muriel, as a family — "

She whipped around to face him. "Ivan, how can you be what you are and be such a fool? Look in that little white girl's eyes, look at how she looks at me. That's not a daughter, Ivan. That's a slave. Is that what you think I want?"

It would be so easy, so easy. "Oh Ivan," she would say. "You're right, I'm just shocked is all — but that poor little girl — bring her back in. Let's make this work."

And then he'd have lost her. He'd have two slaves.

"This is what I am, Muriel," he hissed. "Should I just abandon her? I'm responsible for her — "

Muriel walked to the sink and held onto it, seeking purchase. "You're responsible to me, too, Ivan. You chose me too. You said 'I do.'" She wiped at the corner of her eye a few times as if something was stuck there. "So what, then? Are we going to run away from my home and family? Set up a new life for you and your white daughter, with me as the maid?" She leaned forward at him, her face flushed dark as wine, her voice shaking. "Or are you just gonna *change* everybody so they don't mind any that she's white? Or so they don't know no more? Are you going to just work some of your tricks on Aunt Gertrude and Li'l Wallace and the preacher and the police? Are we all gonna end up as your trained puppies?"

He stood up from his chair, his hands at his sides. He put his ice cream spoon down on the table. If the others of his kind had been there, they would have heard volumes in the clatter of that spoon. Muriel just looked at him. So he said, "I can never give you what you want."

Muriel burst out crying.

That surprised him, and for a moment he felt a little surge of terror from an ancient part of him. What was he losing, that mortals started surprising him? He hadn't been paying attention. It had been easy to see them clearly, in the old days, like dangling string above a kitten, knowing how the kitten would jump. Now he'd fallen into a mysterious country.

He put his arms around her, and she bowed her head to push her forehead into his shoulder.

"You fool, you fool," she sobbed, "I don't need no baby, I just want you."

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Like a fist, some kind of joy or sadness forced its way from Ivan's chest up through his throat and out through his face. Its passage was sudden and unexpected, and Ivan sighed. He did not know who he was anymore.

They held each other. Her tears cooled his shoulder, and he could feel the tremors dancing through her. And then he tasted his own tears, unbidden, cool on his cheeks.

"Ivan," Muriel said in a throaty whisper, "You tell me straight now. I don't want your good intentions, I want the truth. Is there any hope for that little girl? Can you undo what you did?"

It was safe here, in Muriel's arms. In this safe place, he thought about the plan he'd made on the walk back home, and he could smell its stink of pride — the pride of princes. Muriel felt it in the silence, and she stiffened.

"You mortals," he said, the words muddy in his throat, "you walk around with this huge — emptiness in you, like wanting back into the womb. You think we'll fill it. Once you get that hunger...you don't let go. You'll die for us, but you won't leave us. Maybe I can make her forget, but the hunger stays."

"And if you keep her here? Or we go off with her?" She shook her head. "Or you go off with her alone? Is she going to get better?"

"I don't know."

Muriel pulled away. "Good Lord, Ivan! Guess!"

He looked at his hands. "I think she'll be something like a child, and something like a prize, and maybe that'll twist her up." He could feel his cheeks get hot. "No. She won't get better. And I'll have to be...what I was."

Muriel shook, her eyes closed. She put her hands over her face. "Oh Jesus, oh Jesus," she said.

Ivan said nothing.

She wiped her tears on her apron. "I can't give you up willingly," she said. "God forgive me. I can't make you stay. And I can't follow you into that."

"I know," he said. He thought of Aunt Gertrude, of Li'l Wallace, of Henry, of the preacher, of Bob Pratchett the white foreman at the mill. How long before he damned them all? He was a fool.

She saw it in his face. "Ivan. Listen to me. You got to leave folks alone." She reached a hand out to touch his cheek. "And you can, I know

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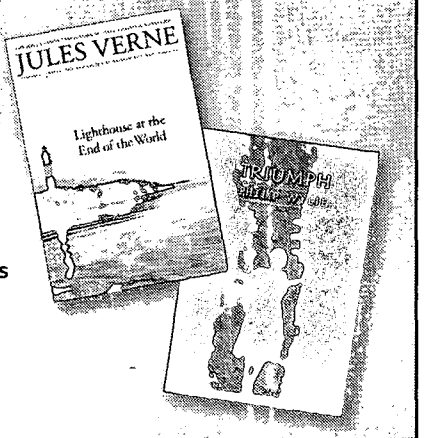

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you can. You ain't no demon, Ivan. You're just a sinner like everybody else."

He kissed her, and took her close. He squeezed his eyes shut and smelled the salt of her tears, mixed in with dish soap and sweat and vanilla and the spice of cedar wood.

Then he blew his nose into the paper napkin and wiped the sweat from his brow. She looked away from him, down at the table, as he got up and left the kitchen.

Sarah was sitting dutifully in the twilight, looking out onto the dark oval of water and the first eager stars that blinked above it. She heard the screen door swing open and turned, bright with anticipation.

"It's time to go home," Ivan said.

She shook her head, unsure if she had heard him correctly. He offered his hand and she took it. Her fingers were cold from the outside air and the ice cream inside her. They walked through the ragged grass over the hill.

In her face was a wolfish joy — she was soaking him in with her eyes. Somewhere behind that need was that lonely little girl, brave enough to pray in a lonely cemetery. His chest throbbed with pain.

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Her lips shivered and her teeth clicked together. He wanted to give her his jacket, but how could she forget him then?

They reached the road. He let go her hand.

He stepped back from her and slouched, scratching his head. He spoke in a new tone that was neither paternal nor comforting, but like that green-eyed nigger who lived in the house by the pond.

"Well, I hope you enjoyed your dessert. Now run along afore anyone sees you hangin' round here."

He saw the arrow of panic as it stabbed through her. Where was her Ivan? Where was her angel sent? Who was this man? "No, no," she said, looking around her. Her head was foggy. She wiped at her eyes. She looked at him: some harmless nigger standing with her under the cold night sky. She stepped away. "What — "

Ivan forced himself to turn and wave respectfully, to walk away.

When he glanced back, Sarah was hugging herself. Her thoughts burned the air. A moment ago she had been saved, she had had a father and a home. Had she been with Jesus? No, she'd eaten with some niggers — shame leapt burning to her cheeks.

She pushed past a fence post and began to run. God had seen her, seen her naked soul, seen everything there was of her to love, and abandoned her. He did not love her at all.

The lost soul fell into the night.

Coldness made a fist in Ivan's belly as he crossed over the hill to his house.

He pulled his jacket around him and stared ahead. Muriel had turned the porch light on so that he would not stumble.

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Readers with strong memories for names might recall Mr. Durbin as the author of "The Place of Roots" in our February 2001 issue. His short fiction has also appeared in Weird Tales *and in the magazines for younger readers,* Cricket *and* Cicada. *His 1999 novel,* Dragonfly, *is set around Hallowe'en — as is his new story, in which a stranger comes to town on the wrong day....*

The Bone Man

By Frederic S. Durbin

IT WAS HUNGER THAT MADE Conlin turn off the route. At least, hunger is what he decided to call the sensation, a growing restlessness that pulled his gaze to the exit sign, that made him search in erratic, highway-driver glances for what might lie behind the billboards and guardrails. It would be just more empty fields, he knew; but he wanted to be down among them now, and to find a place to fill his stomach.

The T intersection at the ramp's bottom gave no hint which way led to civilization; the blacktop to the left actually looked more promising — wider, and with a blur of buildings at the horizon — but Conlin turned right and headed east along a gravel-popping oil road. He was going on instinct, which had never failed him yet. Something about the dusty forest bottomland in that direction beckoned him, the trees vivid in their autumnal colors. Rutted pastures, sagging wire fences, water troughs streaked with rust — landscapes like this never changed, not in the thirty-odd years since Nixon had resigned, not ever. Under a hot midday sun, pigs wallowed in mud on Conlin's left. One stood against the weed-grown

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fence and flared its nostrils as he drove by. Creepy animals, pigs, especially the big ones — lots of brain behind those beady eyes.

The road undulated like a roller coaster, each dip getting lower as it descended to a hidden creek somewhere beneath the red-gold-russet-olive-gray masses of the trees' crowns. Conlin liked low places, the woody, forgotten corners that were hard to see into, hard to get into. Those were useful places, not that he needed one now. This was pleasure, not business.

He could see a town ahead, beyond the first thicket of trees. No usual green sign announced the name, but it wasn't worth reaching for the map. Standing astride the community was a telltale water tower, dull silver and rusting on its legs like one of H. G. Wells's abandoned Martian machines. No name painted there, either. Conlin toggled his driver's-side window down a couple inches, letting in the cool air. Even behind the smells of hogs and dust, it had a purity, clean as the pale light on trees going to sleep.

Conlin knew why he'd taken the exit. It wasn't just about food. Little towns reminded him of where he'd grown up. *Home* — the concept no longer held much meaning, certainly no nostalgia. But he guessed the porches and the alleys never really left you; you never stopped hearing the rattle of boxcars and the slam of their couplings. He liked to drive through these places now and then to see that they still existed.

He hadn't eaten in about sixteen, seventeen hours — a busy night, a few hours' sleep, and then a steady focus on driving. No point racing back to Chicago. The job had gone well. He'd found Enfield — it was on the map if you looked close.

The road climbed. An International Harvester truck loomed at the hill's crest, as suddenly as if the Earth had opened up and disgorged it. Conlin swerved slightly to the right, the weeds brushing his fender. The truck's driver raised a hand amiably and was gone in a puff of diesel fumes and scattering pebbles. Country people usually waved, not that they trusted you. *Hi. Hey. Howdy.* As a rule, Conlin avoided getting out in small towns, but he'd come quite a way since Enfield, and old Cooper wouldn't even be officially missing for about five days. Cooper was "on a fishing trip."

Cooper had made it easy. Thought he was safe in Enfield, but you weren't safe anywhere. Now Cooper was inside a double roll of sturdy,

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ventilated plastic mesh, weighted down with big field rocks at the bottom of a creek much like the one ahead. The plastic would last forever — that was the beauty of plastic. Cooper wouldn't last, though. Conlin thought of catfish nibbling on the old man and then being caught and served up themselves on dinner tables, in the diners. That notion shouldn't be so amusing.

Tapping the brakes, Conlin guided the Malibu down onto a one-lane bridge across a muddy creek. Like the water tower, the bridge was old-style: riveted girder rails no higher than the car's windows, and uniformly rusted to a pitted orange-red; raised tracks for the car's wheels, sun-bleached timbers with a gravel bed between. The hog-wallow stream wandered out of the pasture to the north and away under the gloomy woods to the south.

It was a perfect day, one of those midfall days when the sky seemed to be having a clearance sale on sunlight, *Everything Must Go*. Not a cloud in sight.

Conlin flinched at a flicker of motion and swerved again. He'd had the impression of someone standing just at the roadside, maybe some old farmer about to lurch across without a thought in the world for oncoming cars. But no one was there. It had probably been a trick of the tree shadows and the long banner rippling beyond, on the verge where the forest made way for the town.

He blinked at the banner. It was fixed to four stakes and had black letters on its billowing orange length:

PARADE FRIDAY 7:00

Parade. Today was Friday. Conlin smirked in recognition. Hallowe'en, the holiday when it was suddenly okay to lurk in the shadows and watch the world through the eyeholes of your mask. The sign didn't *say* "Hallowe'en." It didn't have to. The occasion was obvious from the date and the colors. Conlin felt a tickle of impulse — why hurry back, indeed? He could eat a leisurely lunch, then hang around until dark. See a parade. Take life slow. Smell the flowers. Hallowe'en was the only holiday that had ever made sense to Conlin. It wasn't about all the noble, altruistic feelings people pretended to have; it wasn't about the supreme Beings they

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dreamed up and tailored to their needs. It was about the two realities, masquerading and death.

Houses: big ones stood out on the flat horizon, flanked by barns, sheds, vehicles, a few tall trees. But here in the town the houses clustered thickly, some one-storied, some two-. Porches on most. Huge old oaks and elms in the yards, leaning over the shingled roofs.

Conlin kept the speedometer needle hovering at about twenty m.p.h., then came to a full stop at each corner when stop signs appeared, the branches neatly trimmed away from them. People took no notice of the sedan gliding down their main drag — Grand Avenue. Conlin gave a low whistle at how "Grand" it was. Grain elevator towering off to the right, and yes, the inevitable train tracks...convenience store with gas pumps...even a red flashing stoplight suspended above an intersection where some county route slashed through.

A mail carrier swung along a root-buckled sidewalk, toting a heavy bag. Two old men leaned in under the raised hood of a pickup truck in a driveway. A sloppily parked tricycle with pink streamers on the handlebars proclaimed to the world *a little girl lives here.*

Conlin was enjoying his theory of Hallowe'en. The *honest* holiday — the primeval dance that was human existence: *We wear masks. We collect and eat candy. We die.*

Street signs, blue with white letters — ELEVATOR, ASH, CHEROKEE — but no *town* name. No WELCOME TO BIRDPITT, POPULATION 5,000 sign. Had it been hidden behind the orange banner advertising the parade? A low-key town, not giving up more than it needed to. Conlin slowed to a crawl through a school zone, although the kids were all inside. Hallowe'en afternoon, and a Friday to boot: they were probably having parties now, one in each classroom, eating cookies with orange icing and then parading around the school halls in those shiny, slick, cheapo costumes with the elastic-string masks and the licensed character name and cartoon likeness emblazoned across the front. *Right.* As if the Wolfman ran around in a shirt that said THE WOLFMAN. *The full moon...the Change coming on...a registered trademark symbol...forming on my chest....*Har-de-har.

There wasn't even a town name on the *school.*

Hardware store, post office, electronics (well-stocked with them new-fangled telly-vision sets), JASON'S GAME WORLD – ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

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PLAYED HERE! Ooo, role-playing. A couple taverns with neon beer signs in the windows...liquor store, barber shop. There'd be at least one old-timer parked in the barber's waiting-chair, no intention of getting a haircut. Conlin wondered if barbers in places like this still painted your neck with lather from a little round soap-brush; if they still used those lethal straight razors and sharpened them on leather strops.

Here.

STACY'S KITCHEN. Retired farmers would be gathered in there around enormous platefuls of things fried in grease, everyone wearing bill caps indoors. It would do nicely.

There were parking spaces to be had along the main street, but Conlin turned a corner onto WALNUT and parallel-parked in front of a silver Ford pickup along the restaurant's two-story brick side. Rolling up the window, he glanced around. Twenty feet in front of him were a green Dumpster and the alley. Across Walnut stood another aging brick building that looked abandoned. An etched concrete slab over the door said DAILY NEWS. *That's why it's abandoned.* Couldn't be much "daily news" around here.

No parking meters — just a sign forbidding parking in the small hours of the morning. He stretched beside the car, easing the kinks out of his legs and back, enjoying the sun's warmth. On the cracked wall of the restaurant, someone had spray-painted FERG IS HOT!!! in white letters a foot high. A few paces to the right was FERG + DIANE inside a lopsided valentine heart.

Pressing the button on his keychain, he watched the knobs of the door-locks go down with four simultaneous *whunk*s. Comfortable car, courtesy of Jank. Jank did well with cars. In another couple days, this one would be clean and gone: new plates, maybe even a new color, and for sale on one of Jank's lots somewhere between sea and shining sea.

Conlin slid his left hand into the side pocket of his gray sportcoat, tucking his arm close against the concealed hardware in the shoulder holster. He was used to the bulk — a Glock 18, not the smallest of its line, not particularly made for concealment. But it suited Conlin fine. He didn't mess around with silencers. If you had to silence a shot, you weren't in control of your environment. He wouldn't be needing the piece here, but he wasn't going to leave it in the trunk, not even in broad daylight. A car could be stolen, vandalized, or towed because of some pissant city

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ordinance unique to Spudville — Conlin might be parked in a "graffiti zone" or something.

Graffiti...closer to the corner with Grand Avenue, the weathered building's side held another scrawl, this one in a darker hue, a purplish blue that made Conlin think it might glow in the dark. The two words were faded, the bricks around them bleached-looking, as if someone had tried to scrub the vandalism away.

LUCAFER RULES.

Lucafer. It didn't take Conlin long to formulate a response in the same language: *Now, now. Your going to make Jeasis mad.* Shucks, if only he had a spray can.

Across Grand, three women were browsing a sidewalk sale in front of a dollar store. Dumpy, small-town women, one wearing ill-advised shorts that showcased a lot of pasty, cellulite-jiggling flesh. Conlin scanned the parked cars and pickups along both sides of the street — looking for nothing in particular, not dreading the presence of cop cars (there were none) — just being aware of what was where. A guy with a green baseball cap jammed low on his head went into the liquor store. A portly, silver-haired man in a suit emerged from the restaurant and moved off down the walk away from Conlin.

A splash of color drew Conlin's gaze to a telephone pole. At eye-level hung an ad for the parade, black letters on bright orange paper. Before the words, his attention went to the picture in the center: a skeleton, a black silhouette, one arm and one knee raised. Dancing. HALLOWE'EN PARADE, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 31ST, 7:00 P.M. This one said "Hallowe'en." And in smaller print, below the figure: *Will commence and conclude in the V.F.W. south lot. Awards ceremony to follow.* A tiny map in the bottom corner showed the parade route, a square loop four blocks on a side. Conlin checked the street names and got his bearings. It would be simple to find. He was sure it would be the only thing going on in town tonight.

More of the orange papers, identical, hung on poles and in store windows all along the street. The skeleton was an interesting motif, an unusual choice — not a jack-o'-lantern, not a scarecrow and cornstalks, not a witch crossing the full moon on her broom.

A skeleton.

The skull's eyes and triangular nose were simply the orange of the

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paper showing through, but they suggested a glowing, infernal light inside, like a jack-o'-lantern's flame. The mouth was an exaggerated comb-like grid of orange lines. The image triggered a memory...the memory of a book he'd read in early grade school; a book of spooky poems, a different standby Hallowe'en creature on every page. Werewolf, vampire, mummy, witch...the one he'd never forgotten was the skeleton. The illustration, done in creepy black-and-white, showed an animate skeleton in a boy's bedroom — clearly at night, with a bright moon outside the open window. The kid was freaked out, trying to hide under the covers but unable to look away from his nightmarish visitor.

And Conlin, as a kid, had been unable to look away. The skeleton was just standing there, close enough to touch, but not reaching out, not bending forward, not really even seeming to look down at the kid. Just standing, standing. No skin, no rags of clothing — just two or three wisps of hair stuck to the skull, wiggly black lines like rising fumes. What would a skeleton do to a kid, anyway? Maybe that was part of the horror, that you couldn't imagine what it wanted, why it had come.

Conlin blinked at the poster, thinking of that long-ago book. He remembered the poem on that page, word for word:

John is a skeleton,
John is dead,
All bony fingers,
Bony head;
No life in him,
Not a breath.
Lazy in life,
He's restless in death.
All bony fingers,
Bony head —
Hope he's not standing
By your bed!

Shaking his head, Conlin chuckled aloud. They probably wouldn't allow a book like that in a school nowadays. He winked at the skeleton and turned toward Stacy's Kitchen. He was going to have fun here.

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The door was at least half a century old, wood with a central glass plate; instead of a crash-bar or a flange, it had a cast-iron handle with an actual thumb-latch, curved to fit your thumb like a tiny black potato chip. As Conlin gripped it, his eyes picked out a handwritten sign taped up inside the door's glass. No more than a card among bigger, fancier announcements of restaurant hours, an upcoming country music concert, a circus, and someone with a set of wrenches to give away, it grabbed his gaze because of the first two words:

BONE MAN POSTCARDS HERE.

The lunch crowd had thinned; it was past 1:30. Conlin pushed the door closed behind him with a *click*. The smell of the grill mingled with the essences of coffee, cigarettes, and some lemony soap that must be what the waitress wiped the tables with. A ring of customers who could only be regulars lounged around a table to the right, up by the counter: three stocky men and a woman, all past middle-age. They noted Conlin's entrance and went on with their conversation, something about how "Barb" was going to "find out a thing or two." The woman nodded sagely, one of the men shook his head and stubbed a cigarette, and another spasmed with laughter, making his belly bounce.

To Conlin's left, two youngish men were chewing seriously, facing each other across a table. Not farmers, but not office workers, either. The older, thirty-something, with pale blond hair and a dark suntan, was eating a salad. The younger, maybe twenty-five, wore a polo shirt and held a heavily loaded burger. They nodded at Conlin and he nodded back as he passed them to take a table about equidistant from both parties, against the wall opposite the door. No booths here, just Formica-topped tables and a bar with stools. Conlin faced the bar and read through the day's specials penned in blue on a whiteboard.

Brat with onions, no thank you. *Beef tips*..."*fish sand.*" — of course, that would be for our Catholic friends — and it came "*w/fryes.*" Setting his elbows on the table, he tented his fingers.

The woman in the regulars' group leaned back in her chair and called through the oblong window into the kitchen. "Peg, you've got someone here."

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Conlin heard the clink of dishes, a rubbery noise that sounded like a plunger, and at least two people conversing. Peg appeared from the kitchen doorway, drying her hands on a towel. "Thanks," she said to the woman. "That thing's backed up again."

The woman chopped her hand sideways through the air as if cutting off any discussion. "Call Tom. Just call Tom."

"Yeah." Peg came a few steps in Conlin's direction, chubby and young, little round glasses, short brown hair in tight curls. She had a long-suffering look, a reddish nose. "Would you like to see a menu?"

"Uh, no, thanks." Conlin folded his hands. "I think I'll go with the fish sandwich."

"What would you like on it?"

Good. *Sand* meant "sandwich," not actual sand. "Um, tartar sauce? Onion?"

Conlin was also entitled to two sides in addition to the "fryes." He opted for corn and a cup of chicken-rice soup. And coffee — black coffee.

Ten minutes passed. The two serious guys paid their bill and left. Conlin sipped his coffee and half-listened to the regular woman carrying on about how she'd explained it all to Jerry, how if he wanted to keep a job he'd have to show up and *care*. The coffee was good. Peg refilled the cup when she brought Conlin's food.

The bun tasted wholesome and oaty, the fish tender, not oily. As he shook pepper into the soup, the regulars were beginning to leave: first the big-bellied man in overalls, then the chain smoker. Then the woman, promising over her shoulder that she'd ask Vicky something about a broiler. That left only the oldest, stoop-shouldered man in a bright red ballcap, his back to Conlin.

Spooning corn, Conlin watched him. The man seemed to be nodding off. His head had a whitish cast overall, as if whiteness had leached into his skin from his close-shaved, glistening hair. He kept drooping forward, then jerking awake; his head, topped with the red cap, reminded Conlin of a fishing bobber.

Peg warmed up the man's coffee, then Conlin's. When she started reloading the napkin holders, Conlin had to ask.

"I'm curious. Who or what is Bone Man?"

Peg cracked a smile — the first smile Conlin had seen on her. And the

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old man was awake now, turning laboriously in his chair to study Conlin with vividly blue eyes.

"He's a local...celebrity?" (Peg pronounced it "celeberty.") "What would you call him, Billy?" She looked at Conlin and tipped her head toward the old man. "We got an expert here."

The man in the red cap, Billy, was sitting sideways now, bony knees in his canvas pants stuck off the side of his chair. He looked about eighty, the skin hanging loose beneath his clean-shaved chin. "Phenomenon," he said in a soft voice, not strong but steady. He pushed the cap back a little from his wrinkled forehead and spoke slowly, seeming to think about each of the words, laying them out like treasures from a shoebox. "He's a hero and a boogeyman. Some say a ghost. Some say the Devil himself."

Conlin leaned forward, telling Billy with his expression to go on.

"Comes around every year for the Parade. A dancing skeleton, just like on the posters."

Conlin thought of a Christmas parade he'd been to as a kid, at the end of which Santa Claus had parachuted out of a plane and landed with a *Ho, ho, ho* to the delight of the crowd. He supposed this was something like that. "Sort of a town mascot?" he suggested.

"Oh, no." Billy shook his head, emphasizing the *oh* more than the *no*. "No, we respect the Bone Man. We love him, but he scares us. Or maybe that's why we love him. He's lots older than the town."

"He ain't alive," Peg said helpfully. "He's all bones. He's paranormal."

Conlin smiled broadly, looking from one to the other and back, waiting for a punchline. But Billy only watched him, and Peg went back to stuffing napkin holders. The Bone Man was this town's gimmick, and these two were good at presenting it.

"So he's a paranormal phenomenon," Conlin said, "who appears every year at the Hallowe'en Parade."

"That's right," Billy said. "Only not everyone can see him."

Conlin snorted and quickly tried to make it sound like a cough. How convenient was *that*? A ghost with an up-front disclaimer. If you couldn't see him, it was your problem. The local tourism council was brilliant. "Good thing you've got him on postcards."

Billy chuckled. "You coming to the Parade?"

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"Wouldn't miss it."

Billy nodded knowingly. "Folks go all out for it. It's something to see, even if you can't see the Bone Man. 'Fact, I wouldn't be sorry if you can't."

"Why do you say that?" *Aside from the obvious reason of covering your behind.*

"Well...." Billy's gaze drifted. "Seems folks who can't see him at all are generally happier than those that can."

"Does seeing him, like, bring a curse? Like hearing a banshee scream?"

"No. No, I don't mean that, exactly. *I* can see him, and I don't consider myself cursed. It's just...like what the Bible says about how if you increase your knowledge, you increase your sorrow."

The Bible. Conlin knew the Bible pretty well. His parents had ripped and wallowed their way through it along with everything else abusable. There were highs to be had from power and even guilt. But Conlin had given the Church a fair hearing. He was nothing if not methodical.

"You see him," Billy said, "and then you tend to see a lot of things you might prefer to ignore. The Bone Man is...a heavy truth."

"Well." Conlin sat back and finished his coffee. "I wonder if I'll see him."

"There's a way to find out."

"You mean by coming to the parade, right?"

"I mean right now."

Right now. A watery coldness gurgled low in Conlin's stomach. The last time he'd felt it was once when he'd realized the mark he was about to move on was also carrying. Like finding a snake in your bed.

But why should this idea unsettle him? What threat could there possibly be?

As if on cue, Peg stepped around the bar and picked up a heavy scrapbook of some kind from a shelf of curios and phone books. She brought it to Conlin's table.

Billy shuffled over and sat in the chair across from Conlin. Peg once more replenished their coffee, cleared away the dishes, and went into the kitchen. With wizened hands, Billy turned the book to face Conlin.

THE BOOK OF THE BONE MAN.

It was cheap, wirebound, double-wide, the posterboard cover hand-lettered in garish orange marker. The words were scrunched up toward the

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right edge, the result of poor planning. Below the title, Hallowe'en figures had been drawn by many different artists with finer felt-tips of various colors. It was obviously a depiction of the Parade. Some of the creatures were done by children's hands and were mostly scribbles, some dripping blood, some with fangs and yellow eyes. A bipedal werewolf brandished a big cartoon bone. Other images seemed to be the work of teens or pre-teens, mean-looking fairies in improbable armor, princesses with the flowing hair and the huge, innocent eyes of Japanese *manga*. Still other beings were etched with painstaking skill, shaded and three-dimensional, lunging off the cover.

Conlin looked questioningly at Billy.

"Open it." Billy hunched forward on crossed arms.

Conlin lifted the cover and laid it open. More of the drawings crowded the title page, where the same title was spaced better, in bold black this time, the letters arranged on lines drawn with the aid of a ruler. The next leaf burst with multicolored scrawls on both facing pages, left and right. Pictures gave way to a sort of graffiti on the Bone Man theme — messages by dozens of people. BONE MAN RULES! FAN OF THE MAN. WE SAW THE BONE MAN, '98 – THE ROBERT LYNCH FAMILY, SAUK CITY, WI. FAR OUT, BONES! – AN OSTEOPHILE, 1999. And under that one: DUDE, THIS BOOK IS AN OSTEOFILE! – DUNCAN, 11-1-99.

It reminded Conlin of graffiti books he'd read about that were kept in certain campy bed-and-breakfasts, haunted houses turned into hotels — diaries in which guests were encouraged to leave their own messages. Conlin wondered if the "Lucafer" disciple had signed the book, or the person who thought Ferg was hot.

But this *couldn't* be for real — he saw at least fifteen different state names on this two-page spread alone. He rubbed his chin. "You're telling me that tourists flock here every year for Hallowe'en?"

"We don't advertise. We like our peace and quiet. No souvenir shops — just a few postcards, 'cause people kept asking for *something* they could buy and take home." He shrugged. "We don't mind a little company, if folks know how to conduct themselves. Somehow, they turn up." He grinned at Conlin. "Like you did."

"I didn't *know* about the...I'm just on my way through."

"Yeah. I hear that a lot."

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Conlin actually felt his scalp prickle. He glanced at the window, imagining the town filling up with people — hungry, like he'd been, or lost, or with car trouble, or just needing a tank of gas. He thought of the two sober-faced men who'd been in here. Were *they* out-of-towners?

Mmm-hmm, sure. This was all part of the story, the mood-setting for the parade. What else did old guys like this have to do all day but get very, very good at spinning the tale? It probably got better every year. The best explanation was that someone from town had been down to Mexico and thought the Day of the Dead was really cool. Most likely, five or six locals had gone hog-wild with a pack of markers and made this whole scrapbook on a rainy Saturday afternoon.

"This is a new book, you see," Billy said. "It starts in '98. Stacy's got boxfuls of them in back — older ones. And this isn't the only place in town that keeps a Bone Man book. The Parade goes 'way back, and he's always been part of it." With a yellowed fingernail, Billy tapped an entry in purple ink. "Here's one that couldn't see him."

BEEN HERE, DONE THIS, DIDN'T SEE SQUAT! – JIM, NEBRASKA, NOV. '99.

"Another here," Billy said.

VENI, NON VIDI! BONE MAN IS A WE'ENIE! That one wasn't signed.

Conlin nodded. "You give nonbelievers their fair say."

"Yep." Billy sucked his lips inward around his teeth and released them with a smack. "Now we come to the first picture."

He flipped back the next page for Conlin, revealing, amid the almost dizzying sprawl of words and little sketched skulls a single photograph, glued to the right-hand page in about the middle, near the outside edge. One photo in a sea of Technicolor inscriptions.

Conlin bent closer.

The picture showed a wooden fence across half its length; a house behind the fence; people in costumes on the street in the foreground, kids and adults. A bicycle just going out of the frame on the left.

"You see him?" asked Billy.

Conlin saw no skeleton. He felt a twinge of disappointment. What had he been expecting?

"Don't worry. He's hard to see in this one." Billy moved a finger toward the page with dramatic slowness, letting its tip hover over the

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people in masks, the bicycle wheel, the branches of a dusky tree in the yard. "He's right...*there.*"

At the top of the wooden fence, where the pickets ended in points, like a stockade fort, was a grayish shadow. A curve, like the bottom of an upturned bowl.

"He's hiding behind that fence. That's the top of his head."

Without moving his face, Conlin raised his eyes to stare back at Billy from under his brows. So the whole thing was a joke, like showing someone a piece of blank white paper and saying it was a picture of three white dogs in a snowstorm. But still the old man's expression showed not the slightest hint of leg-pulling.

"Now, I know, this one wouldn't convince anyone," Billy said. "It's just in here to get you ready for what you're about to see." He glanced at Conlin with the tip of his tongue poised between his teeth, an expectant glitter in his eyes. Conlin wondered how many times the old man had said these exact same words to others, here in this lunchroom, right here at this table. "And it's also included," Billy went on, "to show how the Bone Man is always a part of our landscape, whether you see him or not."

Conlin gnawed his lip. This was sounding more and more like a religion.

"Now, see how you like *these* apples."

Billy flipped over one more page. It half-folded and then flopped wide under its weight of photographs.

One of Conlin's most useful skills was a mastery over his nerves. He'd stared unruffled into a Tanfoglio nine-millimeter bore; had squinted into cops' flashlight beams with a mark in his trunk and talked his way past. But something about this two-page spread in a cluttered scrapbook hit him like a cold shovel-blade in the gut. Prickles ran across the back of his neck, and his eyes darted from picture to picture.

These were all fairly recent photos, taken with different cameras — most in color, standard-sized, but a couple were black-and-white "artsy" shots, playing up the stark shadows. Parade stills. Lines of costumed people walking, riding truckbeds, leering through makeup and masks. They clutched broomsticks and steadied pointed hats against the wind, trailed dirty bandages, cradled plastic machine guns and axes, sported dagger headbands and bloody sheets. Relatively few of the store-bought,

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media tie-in costumes — and as many adults were present as children, maybe more.

And somewhere in every picture, usually quite prominent, was a capering human skeleton.

A bone man.

Conlin felt himself frown. However the town's spectral hero was created, it was good. First, Conlin searched for the wires, the rigging boom on some nearby tractor or float. But no, the skeleton clearly wasn't something just dangling. It was in too many poses, arms and legs in all manner of articulate positions...and it was all over the place, now in a lawn, now in the parade's center, now balancing on a fence. In one eerie, half-comical shot, it crouched on a rooftop, playing a violin.

Conlin brushed his fingertips across the emulsion. He could see no incongruity, no difference in quality between the figure and its surroundings. These prints were nothing like the bogus images of gigantic fish in flatbed trucks, of farmers sitting atop mammoth pumpkins. Most of the photos were too old to be digital. In some, the Bone Man cast a shadow consistent with those of other figures. In many, the gruesome phantom was interacting with people — stretching knobby digits hungrily toward a kid dressed as a bunch of grapes, tap-dancing beside a tap-dancer in a top hat and tails, saluting a teenager in military camouflage. Nobody in any photo was actually touching the Bone Man, though they obviously saw and made space for him. In the faces not covered by masks, Conlin read a somber respect — and in some cases, what looked like fear.

"What you don't see," said Billy, his sudden voice making Conlin's hand jump, ever so slightly, "is anyone in a skeleton costume. You just don't see them around here. No one wants to step on the Bone Man's toes."

Conlin drew a long breath and scratched his ear. "This is good. I've got to tell you, I can't see how it's done. It's a real figure of *some* kind, not a lab trick."

"Yep," Billy said, smiling placidly as he surveyed the photos himself. "He's real, all right."

Rubbing a palm over his mouth and jaw, Conlin examined the scribbled entries on these pages, trying to piece it all together. THOU UNBELIEVERS! shouted one inscription, a scrawled arrow pointing from the margin directly at the Bone Man. HE'S RIGHT THERE!

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The pictures convinced Conlin that, whatever the Bone Man was, he was neither a mass hallucination nor anything as simple as a local tall tale. The folk around Loch Ness didn't have dozens of perfectly clear pictures of their Monster — yet Nessie was world-famous. "Why haven't I heard of the Bone Man?" Conlin asked. "All these people who've seen him.... Why doesn't the word get out?"

"Now, there's a real good question." Billy leaned back in his chair and stretched his old frame, lacing his fingers behind his head. "I used to wonder about that myself. Folks turn up in droves to see the Parade, and there's no ban on cameras. Thing is, I think the Bone Man likes to keep himself quiet."

"How can he do that?"

"Tell you a story. I know a guy from upstate. I used to bowl with him. He lived down here for a couple years — worked with us out at the elevator. He could see the Bone Man — came to the Parade at least twice that I recall, back in the early eighties. Well, he moved back up there — had property, I think, in that place that has the nuke'ular power plant."

"Clinton," offered Conlin.

"Yep, that's it. Anyway, just happened I ran into him at the state fair about seven or eight years ago. He knew me real well, asked about all his old buddies, and we got to talking." Billy slid forward on his elbows, his shirt making a dry rustle across the Formica. Again, his eyes riveted Conlin's. "I don't know what brought it up, but when we started reminiscing about the Parade, *he didn't remember the Bone Man*."

Conlin felt another chill. "What do you mean, didn't remember? This parade is all *about* the — "

"Just plain didn't remember, like he had this big blank in his memory, like those black hole things out in space." Billy's finger returned to a photo, and he touched the Bone Man. "Like the people who can't see him. They look at this picture, and they see all these other folks standing around nothing, looking at nothing. I said to this guy, 'You know, the Bone Man,' and he says, 'Oh, was there something like that?' I said, 'You took about a million pictures,' and he said, 'I don't remember any pictures of anything like that.'"

Now Conlin couldn't stifle a laugh. "So all these people come here

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and see him, and when they drive away, they don't remember a Bone Man, and their pictures don't show him?"

Billy nodded. "I think that's how it works. Maybe some don't even remember that they were here. I think the Bone Man likes his privacy."

"Yeah." Conlin rocked his head, popping his neck. "What about all these postcards you sell? Do they go blank at the edge of town?"

Billy shrugged. "I never tried sending one."

Conlin checked his watch. Already going on three. It had been years since he'd spent this long over lunch. "Well, it's been fascinating. I appreciate it."

"Seen enough?" asked Billy, indicating the open scrapbook.

"Not nearly enough." Conlin pulled out his wallet. "I can hardly wait for seven o'clock."

Billy smiled. "You'll want to come a little early and find a good spot."

Conlin left a generous tip for Peg. He'd been well-supplied with coffee, not to mention the entertainment. This whole town was just the sort of diversion he'd been looking for. He might as well enjoy it to the fullest — soak in all the creepy charm the parade had to offer, then get a good night's sleep. "Is there a motel?" he asked Billy, who'd begun paging through *The Book of the Bone Man* for himself.

"Two. The Nite-Lite and Metzger's, both out on Lueders. It's the last road running north and south at the west edge of town."

"Think they'll have a vacancy, with all the crowds for the parade?"

Billy seemed absorbed in the album. "Oh, they can probably find you something."

Conlin pushed back his chair and, in an uncharacteristic gesture, stuck out his hand for Billy to shake. "Thanks again for the...." He wasn't sure what to call it. Local color?

Billy shook. His old hand felt like twigs dipped in wax.

Halfway to the cash register, Conlin paused, on a sudden inspiration examining the check, then pulling a laminated, finger-smudged menu from another table. He wasn't worried about Peg's math — he was looking for an address. No luck. "By the way," he said, turning back toward Billy, "what's the name of this town?"

Billy glanced up and answered matter-of-factly, saying a name that satisfied Conlin's curiosity — some perfectly natural name for a little burg

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lost in the beanfields — but by the time Conlin had gotten to the register, he'd forgotten it. He blinked and opened his mouth, but would feel like an idiot asking again.

That's how it works. The thought rolled over him like an icy wave from an open freezer. *Drive out of here, and a mile down the road you've forgotten the whole town.* No, Conlin didn't think so. He used the restroom — clean and dim, but the doorknob seemed about to fall off — then looked at Bone Man postcards as Peg approached from the kitchen.

"Everything okay?" she asked, receiving the check with a pudgy hand.

"Everything perfect." Conlin opened his wallet and paid with small, unremarkable bills.

"That guy didn't put you to sleep?" She shot a grin at Billy and impaled the check on the spindle.

"Not at all. He's got me stoked, actually."

"The Parade? You'll love it."

Conlin normally didn't linger in such situations, didn't give cashiers or store clerks any reason to look twice at him. But he couldn't resist browsing through the postcards.

A few were an artist's rendition of the dancing skeleton, done in a quirky, old-time Hallowe'en style that appealed to Conlin. One was a close-up photo of an ad poster for the parade — taken in a different year, since in the picture Hallowe'en wasn't on a Friday, but a Wednesday. Apparently it didn't matter if the parade came on a school night, a work night, whenever: it was always on the thirty-first. The cards in the top few pockets of the wire rack were photographs of the actual Bone Man, much like the pictures in the album. Conlin ended up buying one of every card. Peg put them into a small, white paper sack, no logo, and Conlin slid them into the side pocket of his sportcoat.

THE SILVER PICKUP was gone from behind his car, and no other vehicle had replaced it. Instead of returning to the car, Conlin strolled for a couple blocks along Grand Avenue, breathing the autumnal air. He caught the faint smell of a bonfire, probably someone burning leaves in a backyard, carrying them to a smoky pile with a gloved hand clamping them against a broom rake. Conlin imagined the pile crackling as the

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flames burst through from below. The smell reminded him of football games, jack-o'-lanterns, evenings of deepening shadow, the taste of candy corn....

Three blocks from Stacy's Kitchen, he found what he was looking for: a drive-through bank with a phone booth in one corner of the lot, next to the ATM. Public phones were getting harder to find these days — and of those that remained, fewer and fewer actually worked. But Conlin despised cellulars. He preferred to do the calling, when calling was absolutely necessary, on his own terms. There was something satisfying — something almost romantic — about finding a phone and making a call when the job was done. Also, not being able to reach him made his clients nervous. That was a plus, too.

He dialed the number, listened for instructions, and dropped in the coins. Two rings, and the sound of the receiver being lifted halfway through the third.

Silence on the other end, a silence that demanded the caller to do the talking.

"Mr. Kline?"

"No," said a cold, refined voice. "This is Mr. Cyrus. Who is calling, please?"

Fine. Cyrus was Kline's assistant, fully authorized to take this message. Conlin spoke clearly, smoothly, watching his surroundings through the booth's glass walls. "This is Jack, calling from the house in Arlington Heights. I just wanted Mr. Kline to know that the remodeling is finished. It's all done the way he wanted it."

There was a brief pause. "He'll be delighted to hear that."

"Yes." Without another word, Conlin hung up.

He left the phone booth and stretched in the lazy sunlight. Such a call was like the cherry on top of the service he provided; it meant a lot to clients to know they'd gotten what they paid for, without having to wait and scan newspapers. For someone of Conlin's caliber, payment was all up front. Clients knew he'd do the job. He had a reputation to uphold, and if he ever failed to deliver — well, Conlin of all people knew that no one could run far enough or fast enough.

He was sure that by the time he found one of the motels, it would be late enough in the day to check in. Back inside the Malibu, it felt like

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midsummer. He could barely grasp the steering wheel, and the smell of new-car upholstery seemed stronger after a baking. Conlin started the engine, opened his window, and cruised slowly until he hit the parade route. Recalling the map on the orange flyers, he followed its north side — Thatcher Street — and worked his way west. He saw a sign for the V.F.W. and glimpsed the building down a street to his left — no problem to find.

The inner, residential streets of the town were thick with sights he remembered from his childhood in a similar place. Camper-trailers, doghouses, tire swings on rusty chains with bare patches in the sere lawns beneath them...and everywhere, decorations. Even here, miles from nowhere, families poured hundreds of dollars into the vast industry that All Hallows Eve had become; and what they couldn't buy, they made. No — he had that backward. The preference here was *making*, stuffing old clothes, digging out time-yellowed sheets, raiding attic trunks for hats and duster coats — and all these offerings placed on the altar of Hallowe'en. Strings of lights festooned the trees, some already on in the daylight, orange and winking, the wilder cousins of the Christmas lights that would go up in another month. Conlin wondered if Christmas were anywhere near the big deal here that Hallowe'en was.

Bats and ghosts bobbed and fluttered, suspended from branches. Plastic gargoyles crouched on the balcony of a three-story mansion. Whole families of ghouls stood propped in yards, scarecrow hillbillies with jugs of moonshine and blood-spattered shirts. Tombstones sprouted like toadstools around porches, and Conlin had an impulse to stop the car and see if he could make out inscriptions on them. Would they have a generic R.I.P., nothing at all, or maybe funny little poem epitaphs? But he drove on, following the lowering sun.

People were on the move: cars pulled out of some driveways and into others; adults lingered in open doorways, talking to listeners unseen within. Sometimes eager children tugged at the grownups' hands. Groups clustered on porches, baskets and bundles in their arms. Already they were setting up lawnchairs along Thatcher, *four hours early*. At dusk, the childhood wonderland would be waking up, coming alive. Suddenly Conlin couldn't wait to be out in it, haunting it, reexperiencing a time long dead.

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Thatcher dead-ended at Lueders Road, beyond which empty fields rolled away, dotted with dark islands of forest. A soybean processing mill rose purple and faint on the horizon like a medieval castle protecting these lands. Conlin peered both ways and decided to turn left, which was wrong: in that direction, the road only took him past more homes, a trailer court, a picturesque cemetery, and a chained-off driveway leading into a pine grove, beside which a hand-lettered sign declared PLACE OF CROWS. Conlin couldn't tell if it was something rigged up for Hallowe'en, or whether it was the crow place year-round. Fitting, since it was right across from the cemetery.

He turned around in a warehouse lot and headed back north on Lueders.

The Nite-Lite was newer than he'd expected — all ground-floor, a long, narrow building. The Bone Man was obviously excellent business: the lot looked full, but the neon sign said VACANCY. Actually, Conlin noticed, it said ACANCY — the NO in front was so enthusiastically dark it had taken the V with it. A modest little motel, just what one would expect for the size of the town — no swimming pool, no boasts of fitness rooms or Internet connections.

Two more cars drove in as Conlin approached the office door. Good: the crowd made it all the easier to blend in. Filling out the registration card, he knew he could write anything he wanted for his name, car make, and plate number — and he did. The pot-bellied owner didn't even look askance when Conlin said he'd be paying with cash. A sign taped to the desk informed him payment was required in advance. Fine with Conlin. Even better, the owner had filled the place up from the front, so Conlin's room was around back, where his car wouldn't be visible to anyone but the residents of a nursing home beyond a chain-link fence — not that it mattered. As he cruised the lot, he saw that no more than half the license plates were Illinois. There were ones from Indiana, Kentucky, even *Florida*. Bizarre. Having eased up to the concrete bumper in front of Room 18, he locked the car and tested the handle on the driver's side. This was the only parking space he'd need until morning. He preferred to walk the ten or twelve blocks to the parade.

The motel's key was modern, a gray card-key. Conlin took a glance at the room to satisfy himself he could sleep there — no tractor-sized holes

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in the wall or corpses sprawled across the bed. *Corpses.* He'd heard an urban legend once that hit men sometimes disposed of a mark by cutting out a human-sized hollow in the box springs under a motel mattress. Stupid, of course — all that lifting, cutting of fabric and metal, and smuggling a body into a motel room — no one reasonable would go to that much trouble to hide something that was about to start stinking to high heaven anyway. Still, Conlin could never lie down before he'd checked.

Three forty-two. Too early to go walking, and he wasn't the least bit hungry. He pulled off his shoes, grabbed the remote, and surfed the TV channels for news. Another big earthquake in Japan, a plane crash outside Madrid, not believed to be terrorist-related. He flipped to a soap where some babe was sneaking through an apartment, rifling the drawers. Conlin would have liked to rifle *her* drawers. Then a guy came home to the apartment with a blonde hottie *glued* to him, and the first babe was staying out of sight, all scandalized and freaking out as the two were going at it on the couch, and then she whipped a sub-compact piece out of her purse. *You go, baby,* Conlin encouraged her — but then the station cut away to a commercial, and Conlin cut away for good. No chance of anyone being definitively shot before the weekend.

He thumbed the off switch. The TV was more irritating than relaxing.

Instead, he watched the light slanting through the curtains. He reclined against the headboard, hands folded across his stomach, ankles crossed. Motionless except for the occasional blink of his eyelids. *Like a reptile,* a kid had told him in high school, the way he'd sit on a corner of the bleachers in the gym during the free period after lunch: *Man, you're like some freakin' snake.* Watching, watching the show. In public places, he watched people breathing, watched where they put their keys, what they had in their hands, how they sat. It hadn't won him any popularity points in school. Then he'd made a career of it.

The light deepened, lengthened across the cheap carpet, ripened from gold to burnished orange. Conlin sat up on the bed and hugged his knees, expectant as a hungry dog beside his dish. Light crept up the dresser, over the TV, over the painting of a bowl of fruit.

Five fifteen.

Conlin left the bed, a crocodile slipping into the water. He stepped into his shoes, retied them. Shrugged into his sportcoat, smoothed it over

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the holster beneath his left arm. Made sure he had his keys, including the motel key. He laughed at himself for being so quiet.

But he did feel as if he were doing something forbidden, something voyeuristic, as if he were about to stroll invisible through a girls' locker room and take all the time he wanted as an entire volleyball team undressed. It was a good analogy — he felt a mounting heat in his groin. He never felt evil doing a mark, stalking some poor bastard down, clubbing him, taping his mouth and limbs, driving him out to the woods, putting the Glock to his head, seeing the last plea for mercy in the terrified eyes. Never a bit of remorse.

Conlin's "soul," if that's what a guy wanted to call it, was like the closed-down packing plant that the kids had been scared of in junior high. Haunted place, all the usual stories, crazy guy living inside, steel hook for a hand, missing pets and homeless people hanging in there, in the dark, dripping, disappearing *piece* by *piece*. Conlin had never been scared of the building, not by then. That was *after*. After he'd found out what his hands could do. In the summer following eighth grade, he'd ripped a piece of plywood off a window and crawled right in there, and he'd found exactly what he'd expected. Nothing. Nothing at all. Emptiness.

So why this tantalizing feeling now, the sense that there was something here he might actually *violate*? A strange idea came as he stepped out and studied the red glare west of town, where the sun was a fat, bulging ball above the horizon, like those occasional eggs cracked open that are full of blood.

The Bone Man knows I'm not afraid of him. He's afraid of me.

He locked the door, circled the motel, crossed Lueders Road, and walked into the dark heart of the town.

Black bushes, spreading trees — there seemed more of them at night, with glowing plastic lanterns strung among the last brittle leaves: lanterns in the shapes of jack-o'-lanterns, white ghosts, green-faced witches. (Whoever came up with the idea that a witch should have a green face?) It was dark ahead of him, though fire still hung in the vanished sun's wake. Slowly the sky's lavender changed to deep blue, and stars glittered.

All around him, it was as if veils dropped away, and Conlin was walking back into the streets of his childhood. Here, under the breeze-shivery maples and oaks slouching toward cold, it was no longer the age

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of the Internet and little phones in your pocket that took pictures and movies; it seemed more the era when cars had lock-levers like golf tees, phones had round dials, and TVs were controlled by big, stubborn knobs on the front. Conlin passed over sidewalks that veered to accommodate trees, some concrete sections pushed up into humps by the roots. Trees *owned* these prairie towns, he mused: trees' crowns were crossbeams above; their roots shot far into the earth and spread beyond the last houses; their trunks were spikes that held the community to the land.

Bicycles leaned against front porches, toys lay scattered in the yards. Wooden rungs nailed straight into bark climbed to ramshackle platforms and clubhouses, their canvas door-flaps bellying like the sails of pirate ships. The light was a warm, gold suffusion, partly from the lanterns, partly from streetlights, partly from the windows of houses.

People congregated in driveways, on breezeways, along the curb, chattering, laughing, hands thrust into jacket pockets for warmth. Some nodded at Conlin, some smiled, some took no notice. Old couples sat in lawnchairs, quilts shared between them. Porch swings creaked and rocked. Steam rose from mugs of hot cider, its tart-sweet scent triggering Conlin's saliva at the back corners of his tongue. Two teenage girls swished by through the drifted leaves, their white teeth biting into caramel apples. Conlin stared unabashedly after them, at the denim riding their curves.

Most jack-o'-lanterns here were true works of art, carved with care — with *love*. Their faces seemed to shift with the dancing light inside, eyes following Conlin, cheeks bunching, nostrils dilating at him.

A police cruiser glided down the street, silent and slow, lights flashing red-blue-red-blue. Conlin made brazen eye contact with the officer driving, who waved. *Howdy. Evening, fella.*

Then, with a sound like an approaching stampede, costumed children *exploded* onto the scene. Conlin had wondered if trick-or-treating fit into this town's Hallowe'en ritual — apparently so. But he'd never seen trick-or-treating like this. It was not just door-to-door, but through the crowds as well, like a wild charge of highway robbers, like forty thieves, like Vikings pillaging. And the townspeople were ready for it. They forked over candy from shopping bags, from backpacks, from car trunks. Grinning, Conlin held up his palms in a gesture of *haven't-got-any*, and the tide of

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witches and aliens and serial killers broke around him. In some of the eyes behind the eyeholes, Conlin thought he saw flickers of uncertainty as they appraised him and dashed away. You couldn't fool kids, not the smart ones. They knew whom to be afraid of. They knew when something wicked this way came.

Six twenty-four. Conlin looked hard at his watch. Had he really been here that long? He'd walked the entire parade route clockwise and wandered through several sidestreets beside, listening to the peals of laughter, the excited calls, the *ding-dong* of doorbells, the crunch of running feet in dry leaves. He'd been watching the phosphorescent batons and flashlights in the hands of kids, the distant silhouettes of their antennaed, helmeted, peak-hatted shapes as they huddled under streetlights to compare their loot and plan their next assaults. He'd found delight in the way their shadows loomed huge on the undersides of leaves as doors opened for them.

No parents. That was the fundamental difference here. Conlin had never seen trick-or-treating done without parents a few steps in the background, their eyes alert for the *real* Hallowe'en horrors. Was it okay here because the whole town was outdoors anyway, a universal army of guardians...or was it something more...?

The Bone Man takes care of things.

Right. That had to be it, Conlin thought gleefully as he turned the corner of Howlet Street — *Howlet?* — and headed toward the V.F.W. The Bone Man watches over his own. *No one wants to step on the Bone Man's toes,* just like Billy had said.

People were coming out in ever-greater numbers with their folding chairs, blankets, and thermoses. Some spectators had cameras, getting ready to take more Bone Man pictures that would fill other scrapbooks, archived for visitors to wonder or scoff at, on and on into the future, page after page piling up like the falling leaves of autumn. Belief and unbelief. To some the mystery was hidden. Having eyes they saw not; having ears they heard not.

Conlin saw, and he heard. Whatever this Bone Man was — and he meant to find out, soon now — this night had always belonged to little Jack Conlin, the haunter of the dark. The Earth-rim-walker. He'd found it again, after too long away. "*The dog returns to its own vomit,*" said

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the Bible. Conlin shivered with a visceral thrill at the frisson of dead leaves.

Half a block from the V.F.W., he was already among the costumed participants of the parade, who milled around adjusting each other's wings or cloaks or headgear, receiving numbers for the judging, holding muffled conversations through their masks. As in the photos, the costumes were mostly good, some astoundingly so. Modern movie characters mingled with the old traditionals, the creative originals, the truly bizarre. There were vampires with flour-white faces and red lips, a mummy bound head to foot with toilet paper, and probably close to a hundred witches of all sizes. There was a wolf-man who looked more like a dog-man, fur spilling out through the tatters of his clothes. Clowns and fairies sashayed and floated. A woman in a rubber crone mask clung to the arm of an old-fashioned policeman; Conlin speculated on whether their pairing was supposed to mean something. He saw a hunchback, a pirate, a samurai...an ordinary-looking gentleman who walked deftly on three legs...a tall thing with red-flashing eyes and the wings of a gigantic moth. Twice, bobbing through the crowd, he glimpsed a kid made up to look like a hideous dwarf. Or maybe an ugly dwarf only lightly made up.

Elaborate floats hulked in the parking lot, their tractors rumbling and puffing smoke. On one flatbed wagon rose a medieval castle; on another, an entire crumbling mansion, thrusting up turrets, bats bouncing on elastic cords, a fiery glow bleeding through its shutters. Another tractor pulled a rolling graveyard in which a mad scientist and a beast-man were packing dry ice behind the headstones.

Conlin paced through the lot and no one seemed to care. There were other uncostumed people, too — family and friends of the paraders, assisting them like pit crews. There were officials carrying clipboards, checking their watches, possibly inspecting for safety. *No flaming rags allowed, no moving chainsaws.* Conlin kept his left arm close, making sure his reliable Austrian friend stayed concealed. And there were other tourists, rubbernecking and talking too loudly, as if having driven a long way gave them special rights. "Wheah is he?" bleated a woman in some variation of New Englandese. "Wheah's the Bone Man?"

"He likes a dramatic entrance," called one of the officials brightly, whisking past. "May not be here right at the beginning, but he never misses

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a Parade!" Conlin was pretty sure this was the same heavyset, silver-haired businessman he'd seen coming out of Stacy's Kitchen.

Conlin had reached the lot's far corner, farthest from the light, from the strobing police car that would lead the parade out under the limbs, under the October stars. Turning, he put his back to a tree trunk. Always on the fringe of the crowd, in the dark corners, that was Conlin. When he was a kid, this night had been less about going up to doorways for candy and more about hanging back, invisible.

It was about watching the other kids, watching how they stood, how they ran together, stopped, and ran off in a new direction. Conlin was never really one of them, but he never stopped studying them, and he could function in their midst when he needed to. He knew what they'd do, what they thought. He could always sense the scared ones, the weak ones. The sick ones.

"Sick" came in many forms. Once it had appeared in the form of a kid named Brian Delaney.

They'd been in third grade, Conlin and Brian, eight years old. Brian's mom was never home at night; Conlin's parents were too stoned to care what he did — so both Brian and Conlin had the run of the town. They weren't friends. Conlin was following Brian because he could do it without being seen — to watch. To see what another loner did on the night of nights.

In a lonely place between the park and the train tracks, Brian knelt down by some bushes and stayed there for a long time, his back to the street. Conlin, spying from a patch of brown weeds, couldn't see what he was doing, couldn't tell what Brian had, as he stood up, in his folded arms.

Couldn't tell until he saw Brian's shoulders shaking, heard the yowling, saw the lashing tail. Conlin's memory held a popping, crunching sound then, but his imagination may have added that. Then Brian had turned around with a vacant smile, and from his scratched-up arms, he dropped a cat onto the sidewalk. It landed with a *plop* on its side, very twisted. Very dead. Its green eyes were open, staring.

Brian saw Conlin then, who had stood up in surprise. Not outrage — no, Conlin hadn't felt sorry for the cat. But something was dawning on him, an amazement that filled his chest like an inflating balloon, making it hard to breathe. As in a dream, he'd walked straight over to Brian, looking from the cat to Brian's blank eyes.

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The cat had been alive. Now it wasn't. Brian had changed it. Conlin had looked down at his own hands as if seeing them for the first time. Then he'd put them around Brian's neck in a kind of wild, wondering experiment. Even bulging, Brian's eyes stayed somehow blank, but he clawed and fought like the cat had done.

Someone in another town found Brian inside an empty boxcar, with the dead cat beside him. No one had even asked Conlin any questions — there was just a detective who came to the classroom once and said if anyone knew anything to please talk to him or the teacher. But everyone knew Brian had no friends. No one was *ever* with Brian...except on the night he died, when they figured he'd been the victim of some drifter riding the rails.

Conlin scratched his chin, watching the parade take shape. He could still see Brian Delaney clear as yesterday in his head. A shrink would probably say Brian had killed the cat because, in a world of powerful, abusive adults, it was a creature smaller and weaker than him, over which he could exert control. Conlin knew it was simpler than that. He was pretty sure Brian, like himself, was born without the insulation that, for most people, held in a little warmth. Brian could see the Nothing behind, under, and inside all the lies people told about existence. There was ultimately Nothing. No reason to be happy or to hope or regret or feel guilty. No reason to be afraid.

"HE WANTS TO SEE YOU."

Conlin jumped, one hand almost — but not quite — going for the Glock. He habitually kept track of who or what was behind him and how close, but Billy had taken him by surprise.

It was Billy, still wearing his red ball cap. He'd added a quilted vest over his pink-and-white plaid shirt.

"What?" Conlin asked.

Billy's shoulders were rounded, his hands stuck deep into the vest's pockets, his blue eyes catching the light. "He wants to see you," he repeated in a good-natured tone. "The Bone Man. It's quite an honor."

Conlin tipped his face, searching for humor, for context. He felt his left eyelid twitch.

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Billy beckoned with his frosty, close-shaved head. "This way."

When Conlin wasn't following after a few steps, Billy paused and looked back.

Conlin stared, waiting for more of an explanation.

Billy spread his arms and raised his eyebrows, as if to say *What's the problem*? Then he pointed at a watch that hung like a loose bracelet on his wrist. "The Parade's about to start. Don't worry," he added, as if concern over the starting time were holding Conlin back. "This won't take long."

"The...the Bone Man *talks* to people?"

"I didn't say 'talk.' Maybe he just wants to have a look at you."

Maybe he does, Conlin thought. Or maybe this was a special demonstration Billy had rigged up for Conlin after their talk — maybe he figured Conlin would need some extra convincing that a skeleton could walk by itself.

All right. It wasn't like Conlin felt any threat. One good shove and Billy would go Humpty Dumpty. Conlin wouldn't follow him into any basements, wouldn't get into a car with him. But he could play along until his instincts warned him otherwise.

"How do you know what he wants?" he asked, falling into step a pace behind Billy.

Billy's laugh was like one quick squeeze on a dusty accordion. "I've lived here all my life."

"That's not an answer."

Billy was as personable as he'd been at lunchtime. "You'll get your answers."

The old man led him down Howlet Street to a corner with one called Dee. It was narrower, older, paved with the bricks of a bygone era. Towering evergreens arched over it and formed a nearly unbroken roof, their shaggy, curtainlike branches reminding Conlin of Spanish moss and the deep South. There were no porch lights shining here, no lanterns strung, no crowds. Only tall, stately houses built well back from the street, peering through the trees with blank glass eyes.

"Why's this one so dark?" asked Conlin as Billy turned right, heading across the bricks.

"Folks that live here are all back there." Billy hooked a thumb toward the parade. Hands sinking into his pockets again, he tottered straight up the middle of the street.

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Conlin caught up. "Is this where the Bone Man lives?"

"He always comes out of the dark. This is where we're supposed to meet him."

After a few more steps, Conlin halted. He was starting not to like this. It occurred to him that the town might be crazy enough to decide which strangers it didn't approve of — just like kids did. There could be a lynch mob back in the trees. He was just going to tell Billy this was far enough when a light flared ahead.

Firelight. An old-style lantern. Someone was hanging it on a pole atop a big, dark platform — no, a wagon. A *float*. Conlin could see the tractor now in silhouette, with a driver sitting in the seat — silent, wearing a hat with a wide brim.

Conlin squinted, shading his eyes against the bright point of light. A second lamp ignited with a *whoosh*. Then a third.

Billy had stopped walking, but he kept his back to Conlin — he, too, studying the float.

It was parked in the middle of Dee Street, ready to roll toward Howlet, though the tractor engine was not running. Its theme, like some of the yard displays Conlin had seen earlier, seemed to be "Crazy Degenerate Hillbillies." Five people in repulsive costumes were moving around on the float, lighting lanterns, wrestling wood-slat barrels into place in the corners. Raggy shirts and overalls, unraveling straw hats, unkempt beards, a corncob pipe. Four snaggletoothed men, one of them obese and completely hairless — and one woman, early twenties, with long, unwashed hair, a tattered dress, and haunted eyes. They all looked as if they'd clawed their way out of their graves. An emaciated man waved at Billy, then took a pull from a jug marked with three X's.

Billy waved back. "The Pollards," he told Conlin, with a grin that said he was fond of the Pollards. "They always do themselves proud."

As his eyes adjusted to the firelight, Conlin could read two hand-lettered wooden signs leaning on precarious pickets at the float's front edge. One said WE THROW CANDY — and the other: THROW US YOUR BAD KIDS.

Conlin frowned, trying to figure out why the float was so high, with the hillbillies about a half-story above the street. He put it together when he began to hear the snorts and grunts, when he caught a barnyard smell.

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It was a rolling pen. The float housed live animals. He supposed a curtain or something would drop away to reveal the interior during the parade.

"What — ?" Conlin began, but Billy snatched his arm.

Conlin followed his gaze to one side, up a driveway, across a dying lawn. In the deep shadows, something moved. Conlin had to swallow, his throat suddenly tight. Despite the curiosity that had brought him here, the enchantment of the evening was gone. He'd had his fun. It was pointless to look for the past. You couldn't go back — and there was nothing to go back to. He didn't care what the Bone Man was. He wanted to find his motel, sleep, and get on his way back north. He wanted a stiff drink. For the first time in his life, Conlin could hardly wait for the sun to come up.

You couldn't go back, but you couldn't jump forward, either. There was only now.

The trees swayed in a chilly breeze. Billy was no longer looking into the yard on the left; now his gaze had darted to the right. Dry weeds crackled behind bushes there, and the wind swirled fallen leaves up in a cone. Conlin watched in all directions, his right hand flexing. He backed up a step, though the move made no sense. He had no idea from where the Bone Man would come.

The fat, hairless hillbilly, his skin white and shiny as a toadstool, lifted a fiddle. Bracing it in the folds of his chin, he began to play a fast, screechy, seesaw melody. The stringy-haired girl, who had been standing motionless as a fencepost, clapped her hands and bounced in place. A horrible, prolonged sound burst from her mouth that was either a laugh or else she was singing along. This *couldn't* be an act, Conlin thought. The Pollards were seriously abnormal. Two of the other men linked elbows and spun in a hopping dance. The guy on the tractor tapped his boot on the back fender and lit up his own corncob pipe.

Conlin turned three-hundred-sixty degrees, searching. He wanted to tell the freaks on the wagon to shut up. He couldn't hear the sounds in the night. Flesh was creeping on his back; cold pinpoints of dread sank into his scalp. He wiped a hand across his face and felt clammy sweat.

Get out of here, his judgment said. *Get back to the car, get in, and drive.*

No.

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He took a deep breath. No fear. Start feeling things now, and he was finished — finished in the job, finished in life. There was nothing to be afraid of, anyway. What danger could there — ?

To the east, out beyond the lanterns' glow, where only faint starlight shone, something flashed white. White against deep black. A jerky, up-and-down movement, like an old film catching on the sprockets. Conlin was thinking of "Death Tag," a nastily imaginative version of the game played by first-grade boys. *If he touches you, you're dead!* In first grade, you knew it couldn't be true, but *still* there was that merest instant, when the feet pounded behind you and you couldn't get away, when the fingers stretched toward you and you thought *no-no-no* —

White-on-black, a glimmer, a whisper of a displaced branch. A shape.

It was as if a powerful vacuum hose were clamped on Conlin's mouth, sucking out his air. From pictures, from postcards, from childhood nightmares, he knew what he was seeing.

The Bone Man. Coming toward him at a dead run.

Dead run. Part of Conlin's mind wanted to shriek with hysterical laughter.

"Ohh," said Billy, "there he is."

"Yeeaahhh!" cried one of the hillbillies.

Conlin forced himself to breathe. All his life, he'd *watched*. He'd learned not to embellish, not to assume. React to what was there. He couldn't explain what he was seeing now, but he was convinced. There were no mirrors, no wires, and the thing couldn't be a man in costume.

It was a human skeleton, running. Bounding over fallen branches, black eye sockets fixed on him. Spreading its gangly arms now, as if in greeting, as if to embrace him. *John is a skeleton, John is dead:...*

Lips pressed together, Conlin shook his head, pushing away thoughts. No fear. No hesitation. This was how he'd gotten to be the best in the business.

He unholstered the Glock.

"What are you doing?" Billy demanded, grabbing his wrist, outraged as if Conlin had pulled a gun on the President.

Conlin jabbed with his elbow and levered his fist up, catching Billy one-two in the sternum and the chin. As Conlin had expected, the rickety old man went down flat on the bricks. Conlin sent one meaningful glance

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at the hillbillies, making sure they saw the gun. They shut up at last, the fiddler lowering his bow, the corpse-girl slack-jawed and staring.

In the sudden silence, the Bone Man's feet made a *crunch, crunch, crunch.*

Conlin went into work mode, laying his fingers in the grooves on the familiar grip. He was a practiced shot, though he rarely had to do it this way. His marks were usually on their knees, hands taped. And they were full of vital organs that a nine-millimeter Luger slug could pierce and rupture. This would take a steady hand. Let the target get close. Conlin set his feet, relaxed his knees, and sighted.

As the Bone Man cleared the bushes in a flying leap, Conlin squeezed off the first shot. *WHAM!* — deafening in the silence after the music.

Tick! Only a piece of a rib flew away, not even breaking the skeleton's stride.

Twenty feet. Conlin had the gun at the full extension of his arms before him, left hand bracing his right. Nice, level shot. On the pavement, Billy groaned.

WHAM! Nothing this time. The shot had missed the pipe-thin neck by a hair.

Fifteen feet. Conlin closed one eye. *WHAM!* Again, nothing, and the shot ricocheted in the distance. Any one of these would have put a living man down. Conlin was good, but there wasn't enough to hit.

Making a decision, he toggled the slide-mounted selector from single-shot to three-shot burst.

Ten feet. Three rapid blasts. Better. The Bone Man's left leg dropped to the street, severed below the hip. The phantom twirled fully around and was hopping now on the nightmare pogo stick of his right leg.

"Come on," Conlin purred, adjusting his aim a few inches, holding the Glock steady.

The Bone Man came on.

WHAMWHAMWHAM!

Yes! The spine splintered and the Bone Man fell in upper and lower halves, chopped through at the waist. The kicking leg drove the pelvis around in a scrabbling doughnut.

Just in time, too. Conlin had used nine of his ten rounds. He could put the last one through the skull, just like a normal job, and crush whatever

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was left to powder under his shoe. Blue smoke hung in the air and the Glock's hot smell was invigorating. Old Billy was propping himself up on an elbow, his face a rictus of pain.

Time to finish this and disappear. The noise would bring every cop in town. They were only a block away.

He moved forward, standing over his jiggling target. It was ironic — almost sad, if Conlin had allowed for sadness. Nightmares and childhood phantoms, it seemed, could be real — quite a discovery. But you could take them apart with bullets. So much for poetry and mystery. Conlin was right, after all — there was nothing to fear, no justice, no good or evil, no meaning to any of it.

The jaw, held to the skull by ropy gray tendons, clacked and clacked, open and shut. Gasping? Talking? Biting? Laughing?

What have you got to laugh about, you — ?

But the Bone Man had one more surprise in his performance. His dance was not quite finished. Floundering forward, rolling on his ribcage, the truncated specter spread both hands on the street, bending his elbows. Then, like some ghastly spider, he sprang upward.

The gun still down at his side, Conlin felt the fleshless arms encircle him. The dry, dead half-man clung to him like an obscene parasite, the eternal grin nearly touching his face, the black eye-pits inches from his own eyes.

Conlin stumbled with a hoarse shriek, struggling to throw the demon off, to free his arms. Dust seared his nostrils, and something worse — the malodorous residue of what had once been living tissue, now black, hardened, gummy, and mostly eaten away by the worms of time.

"Get away!" Conlin rasped, lurching in a circle, swinging his unwelcome partner in an ungainly dance. Behind him, the fiddle began again to play. That long-ago book, that *picture* — what did the skeleton want beside the boy's bed? *What did it want?*

The eyes were caves leading to fathomless blackness that could not possibly be contained inside one desiccated skull. On his knees now, Conlin stopped fighting, transfixed. Deep, deep inside the eyes, he saw something in the darkness. Something huge and moving. Something looking back at him. *Something.*

Unable to blink, Conlin screamed. He screamed in a long, mindless wail, full of the terror he'd never let himself feel.

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The Bone Man's jaw fell open in what looked like an expression of recognition and delight. Conlin was sure that a hissing sound came forth, though there were no lungs to drive it.

"Hhaaaaaaaaa...." whispered the Bone Man.

Through the jaws rushed a foul, icy vapor, white-blue in the firelight. Its touch was blistering on Conlin's skin, and before he could turn away, it flowed into his nose and mouth, clawing its loathsome way down his throat.

With an extremity of horror, Conlin ripped free his arm and jammed the Glock's muzzle against the Bone Man's skull.

WHAMMM!

The noise seemed to reverberate through the evergreens. Conlin sagged backward, watching the bone fragments blossom upward, outward, spinning, raining on the bricks.

The bone arms went limp. Conlin burst out of the embrace, shoving away with his feet what was left of the upper skeleton. The torso cracked and came to rest. One of the legs kicked a little, then went still.

Conlin's own legs moved before the rest of him, scooting him three steps away before he rolled over and got to his knees, then his feet. He caught his balance, poised to run, but spun back at the realization of what he'd seen lurking a step away, a black shadow between him and the wagon's lamps.

One of the Pollards. The tractor driver, with the floppy hat and the pipe clenched in his teeth. In his back-drawn right hand, Conlin saw the glint of a monkey wrench — a half-second before it smashed against his ear.

HIS AWARENESS of what happened next came in flashes through a red haze, punctuated by intervals of darkness — discrete images, almost like photos from *The Book of the Bone Man*. Something was wrong with his hearing. Sounds walloped and wandered, lost in a night that flickered and smoked. First, someone was dragging him by the arms, facedown, the blood from his aching head dripping on the brick street.

Then he was being hoisted, hands tugging him upward.

Then, when the darkness opened again, he was close up under the evergreen branches, and the Pollard girl was mopping his face with a cloth,

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singing to him in a tender, childlike voice. An engine roared into life nearby. The hard boards beneath him shook, and next the overhead limbs were moving, sliding past. The raucous fiddle sawed on and on.

Rolling his head to the side, he saw Dee Street below. He was on the high float, which had begun to cruise. *No, wait*, he wanted to say, but no words came out. Down on the pavement, old Billy limped toward the curb, rubbing his hip as if it pained him. Halting, he looked up at Conlin with a lopsided grin that was half reproachful, half wondering. Chuckling, the old man lifted a brittle hand and waved.

Conlin felt around for the Glock. But two of the male Pollards leaned over him, grasping his arms and ankles. The one at his feet was chewing tobacco. The one above his head smiled kindly, showing an incomplete collection of yellow teeth. "You 'bout ready?" he asked, patting Conlin's neck.

Ready? For what?

The colorless girl bent close, her filthy hair trailing over his face, and kissed him on the lips. Her taste, her scent prickled in his throat like the musk of a dead skunk. But Conlin felt his mouth stretching to smile back at her.

"All right, then," said the man above him when she'd pulled back. "Here y'go."

The two men flipped Conlin, but not toward the street. He saw in a blur that the float's top was a criss-cross of wide planks with gaps between. He slipped neatly through and plummeted into the wagon's dark interior.

His cry became a wheezing outrush of air as he slammed against a hot, quivering surface — an animal body. With a screech, the beast squirmed out from beneath him, and Conlin flopped into a slime like mud, with more hard boards beneath.

Like mud, but *not* mud. The smell....

Huge shapes pressed around him, rubbing each other in the dark, and there was the *huff, huff* of nonhuman breath. Perhaps it was the stench that made him think toilet plungers were probing him, squashing themselves against his chest, his legs. No, not —

Snouts. Round snouts like the ends of logs. Sharp, cloven hooves squishing beside him, one grazing and cutting into his arm. Smart, small eyes in big, jowly faces — eyes in the filtered lantern fire that gleamed red.

Above the squeals and the grunts, the puff of respiration and the hairy

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friction of fat body against body, one of the hillbillies put his mouth down into a gap and shouted: "Soooooooouuueeeeeeeee!"

Conlin had used a vise once, on the hand of a mark in the mark's own neat workshop, when Conlin had needed to know something. He was remembering that vise now, thinking what it must have felt like; though there had only been *one* vise then, applied to one part of the victim's body, and it had tightened very slowly.

Some kind of liquid sloshed over him, smoking and hissing fiercely, but the pain was all gone. That was good. That was good. He tried to close his eyes in relief, but they wouldn't close.

He was up on the clean boards again, atop the high float of the Pollards, and the sweet girl was dousing him with some chemical solution that fizzed and sputtered and cleansed.

No pain. No pain at all. He opened his mouth and shook with silent laughter. The Pollards joined him, whooping it up, and the toad-fat fiddler ended his tune with three dramatic squawks.

The girl sat back on her heels and carefully set down her steaming bucket. Flipping hair from her watery green eyes, she beamed as if admiring a newborn baby. "That's it," she told him. She could speak. "Y'r all ready!"

He wondered what her name was. But then, he couldn't remember his own — if he'd ever had one. Had he been somewhere before? Was he going somewhere?

No. All that mattered was the night of nights, and the Parade. Sitting up, he heard a collective inrush of breath in a thousand throats. Then fingers pointed, all at him. Jaws dropped; murmurs swirled like autumn leaves riding a gale. Cameras clicked and flashed. A different emotion lit the face of each spectator along the curb. Belief. Unbelief. Scorn. Fear. Wonder.

He raised a hand to wave at them, its every tiny bone glistening and white.

The crowds were waiting. There was only now.

The night belonged to him; it always had. He sprang up with mounting glee, turned a somersault in the air, and landed nimbly on the street. Then he began to dance.

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Survival of the Fannish

"In case you needed proof that books can save lives — Michael Auberry, the 12-year-old who disappeared from his Boy Scout troop on Saturday in North Carolina, was found alive Tuesday morning in a remote mountain area, and a children's book may have helped him survive. A few years ago Auberry read Gary Paulsen's Newbery Honor novel *Hatchet*, about a boy who is deserted on an island after a plane crash and learns to live off the land, and some of its survival lessons may have sunk in. 'I think he's got some of that book on his mind,' his father told CNN."

— "Gary Paulsen, Lifesaver?", *Publishers Weekly*, 3/20/2007.

" — and here to answer all your questions is Patrolman Ordway Dollarhide. As you know, Patrolman Dollarhide, along with his K-9 partner, Peanuts, was the brave and resourceful rescuer who discovered our lost camper, Michael Valentine Atreides, after a five-day campaign involving hundreds of searchers. We had hoped to have little Michael Valentine himself present, but the boy is just too debilitated from his ordeal to attend.

"Now, please welcome Patrolman Dollarhide."

"Thank you, Mayor Galliard. I appreciate the flattering introduction. But I was just doing my job. And to continue doing my job now, I find I have to take polite but firm exception to some of your characterizations of the case."

"Why, I — "

"No, please, let me continue, Mayor. There's no point in glossing over any of the details of this incident. It's the sorriest mess I ever took part in, and if we hope to prevent anything like it from occurring in the future, it's best to lay all the facts out straight."

"Well, go ahead then, Patrolman...."

"First off, Michael Valentine Atreides is not no little boy. He's thirteen and weighs more than me.

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I figure him at around two hundred and thirty pounds, give or take a Twinkie or two. Now, there's plenty of sources of drinking water in the Yollabolly Middle Eel Wilderness Area, and the temperature never fell below sixty degrees, even at night. So he could've lived off that fat of his for about another month. His life was never in no real danger then."

"Still — "

"I know, I know, it's no fun for a youngster to be lost all alone, even under those mild conditions. And his parents were going plumb crazy with worry and fear. But the facts of the matter are, Michael prolonged his own troubles and made 'em worse by his irresponsible actions. And they all came out of his reading. Books! That's what caused this whole dang misadventure. Nothing but books!

"I was in charge of debriefing the boy, and I took extensive notes. Notes which I'd like to share now with you all.

"First off, we got the reason why Michael wandered away from Camp Wanna-Beah-Ledge-Un in the first place. He claimed he was looking to find the Lost City of Opar. That's some nonsense that comes straight outta those Tarzan books, stuff that thankfully never got in no Tarzan movie I ever seen. So right away you got him putting himself in harm's way due to crazy notions he picked up from a book.

"What's he do next, when he gets a few miles into the woods and can't find his way home? He keeps on playing Tarzan and starts traveling through the treetops. Lord knows how a butterball like him even did it without breaking his fool neck. But through the treetops he went, making it impossible for our dogs to find his scent.

"So after a day or two he's miles from where we expected him to be. Getting tired of Tarzan, he comes down out of the treetops. And what's he do next? He decides that he's living in — and I quote the boy without quite understanding what he's talking about — 'an S. M. Stirling post-apocalypse novel.'

"Now, he's right by the Big Bongwater River at this point. He could've followed it downstream straight into Junction City. But does he? No. Instead of using the common sense that God gave a grasshopper, he sets about trying to make a crossbow, to protect himself from 'the Lord Protector's soldiers.'

"As you can imagine, he didn't get nowhere fast with that project, so he switches to playing Conan the Dang Barbarian! The next thing

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we can figure, he's climbing a set of cliffs with a stick for a sword, heading for a turkey vulture's nest he's seen, just so's he can try'n bite the poor harmless bird's head off! That little maneuver throws the dogs off'n his trail even worse. But he survives that climb and ends up on the Parched Plateau.

"By now it's day three, but Michael Valentine Atreides ain't done playing yet.

"He was in a good spot to be found. The Parched Plateau is pretty bare and wide-open. The aerial searchers would've spotted him right off. But Michael decides now that he's living in some book called *Dune*, that he's a 'Fremen native,' and has to hide from everyone, including 'sandworms.' He's got a desert-pattern camo tarp with him. Did I mention he's been lugging a knapsack full of *books* and whatnot around with him all this time? Like he needs more goldarned inspiration! So anyhow he uses this tarp to hide anytime a plane passes overhead.

"Now right here is where I want to call Michael's parents, Leia and Luke, to account. They're the ones who aided and abetted his bookishness. He would've been a normal kid if not for them. Turns out they're what're called 'fans,' second-generation fans in fact, making Michael third-generation. They even changed their family name to one outta of this here *Dune* book. The shameful way they raised that boy, without a lick of reality-based common sense, is almost a crime.

"But back to Michael. He makes his way across the whole width of the Parched Plateau and manages to get down into the Lonesome Valley. What's he do down there? Seems the sight of an anthill, of all things, sets him off! He decides he's living in some book named *City*. He sets up what he calls a 'huddling place' in a little cave, starts building a 'robot butler' outta sticks and vines, and tries training up the ants to do his bidding!

"That's where me and Peanut find him on day five, thank the Lord. But even then things couldn't go easy. When Michael spots Peanut, he flips out. Why? Well, you see, Peanut's wearing doggie saddlebags with his dogchow in it. Michael spots them innocent packs and starts screaming, 'Puppet master! Puppet master!' He hightails it for a quarter mile before we could catch up to him. Guess nearly a week in the Yolla Bolly done improved his stamina somewhat, because back at Camp Wanna-Beah-Ledge-Un he never done nothing except lay on his bunk and read.

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"Even when I was taking him outta the Yolla Bolly, he kept on squirming and fussing, saying his name was 'Han Solo,' calling me 'Darth Vader,' and begging me not to 'freeze him in carbonite.' That part might be movie talk, but I bet it's in a book somewhere too.

"And that, as I might put it, is all she wrote.

"Now, I'll be happy to take all your questions, if'n you can answer one of mine

"Any of your reporter-types know a good literary agent for my story?"

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Mary Rickert's first collection of short stories, Map of Dreams, *garnered some nice reviews over the past year and it is currently a finalist for the World Fantasy Award. Her new story is a fantasy that might make you forget the women who run with wolves and make you think of the children instead....*

Don't Ask

By M. Rickert

WHEN THE LOST BOYS returned with their piercings, tattoos, and swagger, we rejoiced and greeted them with balloons, bubble gum, chocolate chip cookies, and bone-crunching hugs, which they did not resist. Only later did we realize that this was one of their symptoms, this acquiescence, not a sign of their affection for us, though we do not doubt their affection.

How could wolves slope through town, unseen, and steal our boys from bicycles, from country roads, from the edge of the driveway, from our kitchen tables, dank with the scent of warm milk and soggy cereal; from our arms — wasn't it just yesterday that we held our boys close and sang them lullabies? How could they be taken from us?

Yet they were, and we wept and gnashed our teeth, tore our hair and screamed their names into the dark. Through the seasons we searched for them so thoroughly that even in our dreams we could not rest and often awoke to find dewy grass stuck to the soles of our feet, dirt beneath our fingernails, our hair matted by the wind. We continued to search even

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after the Sheriff, with his hound dog face and quivering hands, said he would never stop looking but couldn't keep meeting with us and the very next day we woke up and no one waited at the door with pots of coffee and boxes of sticky, bright-colored doughnuts, and we sat at our kitchen tables and listened to school buses pass, not even slowing down for the memory of our sons.

But why speak about sorrow now that our boys have returned? They are home again, sleeping with hairy feet hanging over the edges of little boy beds, wearing the too small T-shirts, the split pants that reveal their long bones and taut muscles which quiver and spasm while they dream.

Of course we realized that in the years our boys were gone they had grown, this was the hope at least, this was the best possibility of all the horrible scenarios, that our lost boys were growing in the wolves' den and not slaughtered by them — so yes, we are happy, of course we are, but what is this strange sorrow we discover in the dark? Why can't we stop weeping during this, the happiest of times?

Years before our boys returned there was the return of the famous lost boy, stolen from the end of his driveway, the wheels of his blue bicycle still spinning when his mother went to the door to call him in for dinner and saw the bike there but did not immediately comprehend it as a sign of catastrophe. He was missing for eight years, and was a hero for a while, until he started committing petty crimes in the neighborhood.

The famous lost boy, a man now, explains that he has been observing our behavior and the behavior of our sons. We cannot help but feel squeamish about the whole thing, we are uncomfortable with the notion that, after everything that happened, we have been studied and observed and did not know it. We discuss this in whispers in the high school auditorium, where the famous lost boy has come to speak. The therapists have their theories but we assume only one person has the truth and we are eager to hear what he can tell us about all our suffering, because, we say, nodding our heads and hugging ourselves in the cold auditorium, this happened to all of us.

"No," the famous lost boy (now a grown man with long, stringy hair) says. "It didn't."

We have been advised by therapists and counselors, experts beyond

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the meager fourth grade education of the famous lost boy (by the time he came back, he was too angry and unruly for school) not to ask what happened. "They will tell you when they are ready," the experts say.

We ask them if they want maple syrup for their pancakes, what show they'd like to watch, what games they'd like to play. We spoil them and expect them to revel in it, the way they did before they were taken, but oddly, in spite of all they've been through, and the horrors they have endured, they behave as though our servitude and their eminence is a given. Yet, sometimes we ask a question, so innocent, "chocolate chip or peanut butter?" which they respond to with confusion, frowning as if trying to guess a right answer, or as though unfamiliar with the terms. Other times they bark or growl like angry dogs being taunted, but it passes so quickly we are sure it's been imagined.

The famous lost boy wants us to give him our sons. "You can visit whenever," he says.

What is he, crazy? What does he think we are?

"You don't understand them. Nobody does. Except me."

We are not sure if this is true. The part about him understanding them. Perhaps. We know that we don't. The therapists say, "Give it time. Don't ask."

We ask them if they want meatloaf or roast chicken and they stare at us as if we have spoken Urdu. We show them photographs of the relatives who died while they were gone and find it disturbing that they nod, as if they understand, but show no grief. We stock the refrigerator with soda, though we know they should drink juice, and Gatorade, remembering how they used to gulp it down in great noisy swallows (and we scolded them for drinking right out of the bottle) after games of little league and soccer, though now they are happy to sit, listlessly, in front of the computer for hours, often wandering the house in the middle of the night. We ask them if their beds are comfortable enough, are they warm enough, are they cool enough, but we never ask them what happened because the therapists have told us not to. When we explain this to the famous lost boy (though why do we feel we have to explain ourselves to him? He can't even hold down a job at McDonald's) he says, "You don't ask, because you don't want to know."

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We hate the famous lost boy, he sneers and ridicules and we do not want our sons to turn out like him. He is not a nice man. We just want him to go away, but he won't. Notoriously reclusive for years, he is now, suddenly, everywhere. Walking down Main Street. Hanging out at the coffee shops. Standing on the street corner, smoking. We are sorry to see that our boys seem to like him. Sometimes we find them, running together, like a wild pack. We call them home and they come back to us panting, tongues hanging out. They collapse on the couch or the floor and when they fall asleep they twitch and moan, cry and bark. We don't know what they dream about, though we think, often, they dream of running.

They run all the time now. In the morning they run down the stairs and around the kitchen table. We tell them to sit, or calm down, but it doesn't really work. Sometimes we open the door and they tear into the backyard. We have erected fences but they try to dig out, leaving potholes where tulips and tiger lilies and roses blossomed through all those years of our grief. We stand at the window wondering at the amazing fact of their tenacity in trying to escape us when (and this is public knowledge, much discussed and debated by newscasters and talk show hosts in those first heady weeks after they were found) they never tried to escape their beasts.

Sometimes we feel our neck hairs tingle and we find the lost boys staring at us like animals in a cage, frightened and wary, then they smile, and we smile in return, understanding that they will have these bad memories, these moments of fear.

THE FAMOUS LOST BOY sighs, and right there, in the high school auditorium, lights a cigarette, which Hymral Waller, the school board president, rushes to tell him must be extinguished. "What?" the word sounds angry in the bite of microphone. "This?" Hymral's words drift from the floor, hollow, balloon-like, "fire," and "sorry." The famous lost boy drops the cigarette to the stage floor and stamps it out with the toe of his sneaker. We gasp at his impertinence and he squints at us.

"Okay. So, right. You're protecting your children by worrying about me and my friggin' cigarette?" He shakes his head, laughing a little jagged laugh, and then, without further comment, turns and walks out the fire exit door.

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We should have just let him walk away. We should have gone home. But instead, we followed him, through the icy white streets of our town.

He walks down the cold sidewalk (neatly shoveled, only occasionally patched with ice) beneath the yellow street lamps, hunched in his flimsy jean jacket, hands thrust in his pocket, acrid smoke circles his head. We cannot see his face, but we imagine the nasty, derisive curl of his lips, the unruly eyebrows over slit eyes, the unshaved chin stubbled with small black hairs as though a minuscule forest fire raged there.

We walk on the cold white sidewalks, beneath the blue moon and we breathe white puffs that disappear the way our sons did. We keep our distance. We are sure he does not realize we have followed him, until, suddenly, he leaps over the winter fence (meant to discourage errant sleigh riding from this dangerous hill) into the park. A shadow passes overhead, just for a second we are in darkness, and then, we are watching the shape of a lone wolf, its long tail down, its mouth open, tongue hanging out, loping across what, in spring, will be the baseball diamond. We all turn, suddenly, as if broken from some terrible spell, and, careful because of those occasional patches of ice, we run home where our lost boys wait for us. (Or so we like to think.) We find them sprawled, sleeping, on the kitchen floor, draped uncomfortably across the stairs, or curled, in odd positions, in the bathroom. We don't wake them. Any sleep they find is sorely needed and any interruption can keep them up for days, running in circles and howling at all hours. The doctors have advised us to give them sleeping pills but we are uncomfortable doing so; we understand that their captors often drugged them.

"It's not the same thing," the experts say.

Well, of course not. The experts are starting to get on our nerves.

And now, we realize, as we stand in the dark rooms of our miracle lives, we have been consulting the wrong professionals all along. We don't need psychologists, psychiatrists, medical doctors, or the famous lost boy. We need a hunter, someone who knows how to kill a wolf.

We find her on the Internet and pool our resources to pay her airfare and lodging at the B & B downtown. We wish we had something more appropriate, fewer stuffed bears and fake flowers, more hunting lodge, but we don't.

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When she arrives we are surprised at how petite she is, smaller than our boys, with an amazingly chipmunky voice and an odd xylophone laugh. She comes into the high school auditorium bearing the strong scent of the B & B roses soap, and we think we've been duped somehow, but, once we adjust our positions, craning our necks to see between shoulders, scooting over to the edges of the cold hard chairs, adjusting to her unexpected size, she commands our attention.

"Now, wait a minute," she says, laughing (and we resist the temptation to cover our ears). "Why are you all making this so complicated?"

We explain to her again how a werewolf roams amongst us, a monster! We shout and interrupt each other. We try to tell her how the werewolf was once one of our own. "We don't really want to hurt him," someone says. "We just want him gone."

At this she looks at us in such a way that we are all victims of her gaze. "Now wait a minute, why did you send for me? What am I doing here? Are you hunting, or starting a zoo?"

There is a moment's silence. After all, a zoo might be nice, a perfect addition to our town, but from the back of the room, a voice cries out, "Hunting!" The cry is taken up by all of us. Our boys have been through enough. We will protect them at any cost.

The small pink tip of her tongue protrudes between her pretty lips and she nods slowly, smiling. "He's not necessarily a werewolf. Not all men who turn into wolves are, uh, wait a minute. I'd like to get my fee now."

Duped! We've been duped after all. Suddenly it seems we have found ourselves in the middle of a bad joke, we'll pay her and she'll say something pithy and, all right, perhaps a little funny. Here's how you do it, she'll say and tell us something completely useless. We begin to argue this plan, what does she think we are, country hicks? Until finally she shrugs and nods at Hymral, who has volunteered to be her chauffeur and local guide. He has reported that she asked him if there are any good vegetarian restaurants in the area, which we consider further evidence against her. A vegetarian hunter, who ever heard of such a thing? But when we confront her with all the evidence, her small frame, her flowered suitcases, her lack of weapons, she just shrugs. "What's going on here, folks," she chirrups. "I've got ten jobs waiting for me right now and I ain't gonna stay another night, lovely as it is. If you want my expert guidance,

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you are going to have to pay me up front, 'cause the fact is, catching a wolf just ain't that hard, but I have to earn my living somehow."

"You gonna use your feminine wiles?"

She fixes such a look in the general direction of that question that we all shiver and step back as if separating ourselves from the inquisitor.

"I ain't no prostitute," she says, disgusted.

Well, what were we going to do? Consult more therapists with their various opinions and modalities? Call the Sheriff who did everything he could to help us find our sons though none of it was enough and they came home only after a freak series of events? Pray, as we did for all those nights and all those days and all those hours upon minutes upon seconds when our sons were being torn apart? Or pay this little Goldilocks person to rid us of the danger that resided amongst us?

We pay her, of course.

HE LIVES in a shack at the edge of town and he does not expect our arrival, though certainly he sees all our cars coming up the long deserted road, headlights illuminating the taloned branches of trees and the swollen breasts of snow. Certainly he hears the car doors open and shut. We stand there whispering in the dark, observe the light go on in the small upstairs window and observe it go out again. We suspect he is watching us through the web of old lace curtain there. We feel horrible, just terrible about what we have come to do but we don't even consider not doing it. At last he opens his front door. He is wearing plaid flannel pajamas, boots, and that old jean jacket again, which, later, some of us recall, was the coat his parents bought him when he first came back, all those years ago. "What's up?" he says.

We don't look at each other, embarrassed, and then at last someone says, "Sorry, Jamie, but you've got to come."

He nods, slowly. He turns to look back into his house, as though fondly, though later, when we went in there, we all agreed it was nothing to feel sentimental about, a beat-up couch, an ancient TV, a three-legged kitchen table, and, both disturbing and proof of our right course, enormous stacks of children's books, fairy tales, and comics. To think he wanted us to send our boys here!

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He shuts the door gently, thrusts his hands into his pockets, sniffs loudly. He works his mouth in an odd manner, the way boys do when they are trying not to cry.

He walked right to us, as though he had no say in the matter, as though he could not run, or shout, or lock himself in the house, he came to us like a friendly dog to kibble, like a child to sugar, he came to us as though there was no other possible destination. He didn't ask why or protest in any way. It was so strange. So inhuman.

She was giggling when she told us how to do it, as though it were all just a joke, but she was also counting a big stack of money at the time. "How you catch a wolf is you catch the man. This is something the French knew. You don't have to wait until he turns and his teeth are sharp and he has claws."

We live tidy lives; ice-free sidewalks, square green lawns, even our garages, so clean you could eat in them (and some of us do, using them as summer porches). We are not eager to do something so sloppy, but for our sons we make the sacrifice.

We cut and cut looking for the pelt.

"The wolf rests within," she said before she wiggled her red nail-polished fingers at us and nodded for Hymral to take her to the airport.

We have grown sensitive now to the sound of screams. Our boys run through the town, playing the way boys do, shouting and whatnot, but every once in a while they make a different sort of sound, blood-curdling, we always thought that was an expression, but when a man screams while being cut, his blood is dotted with bubbles as though it is going sour.

Once it was begun, it was impossible to stop.

"Wolf! Hair!" someone shouted holding up a thatch, which caused a tremendous amount of excitement until we realized it was scalp.

All we needed was the hair of the wolf trapped within the famous lost boy to redeem ourselves. There was no redemption.

Our boys slam the doors and kick the cats. We scold them. We love them. They look at us as though they suspect the very worst. They ask us about the famous lost boy and we say, "Don't ask," but they do, they ask again and again and again, they ask so much and so often that each of us, separately, reach a breaking point and turn on them, spitting the words

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out, the dangerous words, "What happened to you, while you were lost?"

They tell us. They tell us everything about the years upon months upon days upon hours upon minutes upon seconds. We sweat and cry. They gnash their teeth, pull their hair, scratch themselves incessantly. We try to hold them but they pull away. The sun sets and rises. We sleep to the drone of this terrible story and wake to another horrible chapter. We apologize for our need for sleep, but the recitation continues, uninterrupted, as if we are not the reason for it. We become disoriented, we have waking dreams, and in sleep we have death. Our boys change before us, from the lost sons we kissed on freckled noses to sharp-toothed beasts. We shake our heads. We readjust.

And we know now that what we said for all those years was not just a promise, but a curse; we will always be searching for the boys that were taken from us. We will never find them, for they are lost, no grave to mark their passing and passage by which they can return, like dreams or the memory of sunshine in the dark. We fill their bowls with water, and they come in slobbering, tongues hanging out, collapsing on the floor or couch, shedding hair and skin and we would do anything for them, but still, some days, when the sun is bright or clear, you can find us staring out at the distant horizon. We have discovered that if we look long enough and hard enough we can see them again, our lost boys, their haircuts ragged with youth, their smiles crooked. They are riding bicycles, jumping over rocks, playing with their friends, shoving hamburgers into their mouths, gulping soda, eating cake, running out the door, running down the sidewalk; the sun shining on them as if they were not just our sons, but sons of the gods and then, suddenly, we are brought back to the present, by that feeling at the back of our necks, and we turn to find them watching us with that look, that frightened, wary look of an animal caged by an unkind human. At moments like these, we smile, and sometimes, on good days, they smile back at us, revealing sharp white teeth in the tender red wounds of their mouths.

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S. L. Gilbow's first published work of fiction was "Red Card" in our Feb. 2007 issue. In this second story of his, he displays again a deft hand at the sort of social extrapolation that has been one of this magazine's mainstays for fifty-odd years. (And long may that trend continue.)

Who Brought Tulips to the Moon?

By S. L. Gilbow

MR. HUDSON IS ON THE Moon, and he knows why he is there — he has lived too long. He is ninety-four. His heart is strong; his lungs are clean; his kidneys work just fine. There are no lumps on his skin or tumors in his bowels. His hair is full; his sight is keen; his teeth are straight. He is, according to four befuddled geriatricians he has left behind on Earth, in perfect health, and there is little he can do about it.

So now he is on the Moon, threading his way through a cluster of tourists down Corridor Fourteen. A bead of sweat crawls down his nose and slips into his mustache. The androsteward on the shuttle from Dallas assured them maintenance was working overtime to fix the heating problem, but the crowd still grumbles, with an occasional comment on what real service used to be like. Mr. Hudson stops, throws back his head, and reads a banner beaming proudly above him: LUNACY PARK — WHERE GOOD THINGS HAPPEN.

"Come along, Daddy," snaps Laura. She stretches her thin neck

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forward, plows her way through a mass of stalled travelers and covers thirty more feet of the Moon.

"I'm trying," calls Mr. Hudson, but Laura doesn't hear him. A large man, six-foot-four in his prime, he struggles with the unsettling change in gravity. The compensating boots and belt are useless, but he still manages to gain control of his footing and slip around a meandering couple holding hands — honeymooners he guesses. As he starts to pick up speed, as he begins to think he is getting used to the gravity and the boots and the belt, he loses his balance, lunges forward and plows over a tiny woman wearing a pink dress. An old woman, almost as old as Mr. Hudson, she flies backward and hits the ground like a dropped fork.

"I'm — I'm so...." Hot blood flows to Mr. Hudson's ears. His breath is short, his face numb. He stands there, gazing at the old woman — her arms outstretched, her legs spread at forty-five degrees, posed as if to make snow angels.

Weary tourists have stopped to watch, stopped to glare judgmentally. One jumps back while another, hovering over the old woman, scolds Mr. Hudson: "Look what you've done."

Laura, now far ahead, has no idea of what has happened. "Daddy, come on!"

"Are you all right?" asks Mr. Hudson, looking down on the old woman like some ancient giant.

The woman in pink wiggles, raises her head, and pushes herself to a sitting position. "What are you doing?"

"Maybe we should call a doctor," says Mr. Hudson.

"I am a doctor," says the old woman, touching the back of her head with two thin fingers. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"There's nothing wrong with me," she says adamantly.

Mr. Hudson offers a large, dark hand, which the old woman reluctantly accepts. He pulls her to her feet, slowly, carefully. He smiles an awkward, self-conscious smile into stern, brown eyes. She is small, but not frail. Her skin is olive and her hair the color of ice.

"I'm sorry," says Mr. Hudson.

"You should be," says the old woman simply.

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"Daddy, I'm not waiting." Laura, an echo in the distance, has lost all patience.

Mr. Hudson nods an ambiguous nod that not even he understands and takes off down the corridor to catch up with Laura. As he dashes away, he hears the old woman, her words faded and incoherent except for one clear phrase: "What a jackass!"

Should he have stayed longer? Should he have been more help? Should he have asked her name? By the time he catches up with Laura, his head is spinning with questions.

"We wouldn't be so far behind if we had gotten better seats on the shuttle," says Laura, stopping at an intersection. A sign points right toward Lunacy Park while another points left to Smooth Passing Incorporated. Mr. Hudson looks to the right. He would love to go to Lunacy Park. He hasn't been to a park in thirty years, and now here one is, one simple right turn away. An excited little girl sporting blue curls, her sliver of a hand grasping the cuff of her mother's coat, hurls herself down the corridor toward Lunacy Park.

"Hurry," she squeals. The mother stumbles after her.

"This is where we turn," says Laura.

"Left, I assume," says Mr. Hudson.

"You're so silly, Daddy."

"Aren't we going to wait for Danny?"

Danny, Laura's husband, is far behind them now, almost out of sight, a gray smudge in the distance. Perched on his toes, he looks out at the lunar landscape through one of the small, high, thick windows that dot the corridor. Mr. Hudson glances at a portal nearby and, for the first time, realizes he is almost completely underground.

"Danny will catch up," says Laura. "He always does."

LUNACY PARK has siphoned off most of the visitors; only a thin ribbon of wandering souls remains. The fast movers are gone now, all except for Laura and Mr. Hudson who spin around a kink in the corridor and come to a sudden stop in front of an enormous holographic sign: SMOOTH PASSING — WE MAKE THE NEXT STEP EASY. Laura, not to be slowed, dashes through the "Easy." Mr. Hudson, less comfortable with walking through

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solid-looking objects, slips sideways through the "Make" and steps out of the heat into an enormous dome and the cool, artificial breeze of Smooth Passing Incorporated.

Mr. Hudson pulls a tri-fold brochure out of his hip pocket and taps a picture in the center panel. "Welcome to Smooth Passing," says the brochure as the picture — the very view in front of him — jumps to life: the Smooth Passing Visitors Center in all its splendor; the reception desk of polished stone; the modest garden; The Moonwalk Café. Golden beams shoot up the dome to support a circular viewing platform near the very top. The platform is crowned by massive dark windows looking out onto the surface of a black Moon. Mr. Hudson finally realizes what the brochure has been trying to tell him, what he has refused to believe: this is one fine place.

To the left, a small company of guests lounge around a circle of fountains as two toddlers chase a squirrel up a tree. The squirrel is mechanical and the tree metal, he guesses. It is hard to be sure. Bushes, probably real, emit a requiem interrupted only by the occasional chirping of birds. Mr. Hudson doubts that there are any real birds here, but he looks around to be sure. He doesn't see a single one, but he does see the Smooth Passing hallmark display, familiar to anyone who has ever seen a Smooth Passing advertisement. It is an animated poster of a family — a father, mother, and three children — gently hugging a white-haired matriarch. They hug her over and over and over again — about four seconds per hug — and will do so for eternity. Scribed under the poster are the words "We will miss you." Mr. Hudson wonders if he will get the hugs.

"Daddy!" Laura is ahead of him again.

"Go," he says. "I'll catch up." He wishes he had said that sooner.

As he takes in the view, a few stragglers filter in, filling up vacant space. To his right, he catches a flash of pink. It is the old woman again. He wants to go to her. He wants to tell her how sorry he is, to explain that he really isn't a jackass — at least not much of one — at least not the one she thinks he is. But he doesn't say anything. He just mouths "I'm really sorry," then turns, makes his way past the guests who have moved ahead of him, and joins Laura, already giving the receptionist fits.

"I'm sure it's there," barks Laura. "I made the reservations myself."

"Let her look," says Mr. Hudson, but Laura has never listened to him.

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"I hate wasting time," she says.

The receptionist, her jaw tight, her face tense with patience, slides her hands over the counter, searching one data-file after another. She is dressed in a red jumpsuit like the ones worn by the early colonists and wears a button on her collar that says, "Making the Next Step Easy." She flips a strand of limp hair away from her eyes and searches some more.

"Here it is," she finally says. "Severs, right?"

"Three rooms," says Laura.

"You're here for one passing?"

"Are you having a sale?" asks Mr. Hudson.

Laura jabs him in the side. It is not a playful jab. "That's right," she says.

"Do you have the passing form?" Smooth Passing is very clear about filling out the paperwork before you arrive.

"Yes," says Laura, in a bit of a panic. "My husband has it." Mr. Hudson scans the crowd and sees Danny stepping through the Smooth Passing sign. "Hurry up!" shouts Laura. Danny doesn't hurry; he never has, not as long as Mr. Hudson has known him. "They need the form!" calls Laura.

Danny ambles to the counter. "You're always in such a rush," he says, reaching into the inside pocket of his green jacket. He pulls out a neatly folded piece of paper and hands it to the receptionist.

"We need to review the form," says the receptionist, her face expressionless.

"It's good," says Laura.

"It's recommended that I read it aloud."

"We all signed it on Earth," says Danny.

"As a family," adds Laura proudly.

"I still have to ask a few questions," says the receptionist, following strict protocol. "Have you sought medical assistance on Earth?"

"Oh, yes," says Laura. "We've been to four doctors. None of them could find a thing wrong."

"And you're sure this is what you want."

"We have all talked about it," says Laura. "Haven't we?" Mr. Hudson and Danny nod in agreement; they have indeed talked about it, talked it to death. "It's what we want," she says.

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"Does the document accurately reflect your wishes?" asks the receptionist, looking unflinchingly into Mr. Hudson's eyes. Mr. Hudson is startled by the question, but even more startled by the eye-contact. "No," he wants to say. "I want to ride the Monster Slide into the largest standing pool of water on the Moon. I want to eat Zongo Bars in Lunacy Park till I vomit red goo." But he doesn't say that. He nods and says, "Yes, it's what I want."

The receptionist turns to Danny. "Do you affirm that the form accurately reflects your wishes?" She has asked this question a thousand times.

Laura glares at Danny. Her eyes close to slits and her chin juts forward. She doesn't want any complications now. "I guess I do," says Danny.

The receptionist annotates the form. "Perform the verification then," she says. Mr. Hudson lays his right hand on a small, ceramic plate. "It looks good," says the receptionist. Laura and Danny repeat the action with the same results. "The passing will be conducted tomorrow night," says the receptionist, handing the form back to Danny, who folds it and slips it back into his pocket.

"Well, I don't understand why we have to wait a day," says Laura. "None of us are going to change our minds."

"It's official policy," states the receptionist. "The porter will show you to your room."

An androporter, human looking in torso and head but pragmatically metal and wheels from the waist down, whirls out from behind a bush, signals for them to follow, and leads them to another corridor.

Laura, Danny, and the androporter drop Mr. Hudson off at the door to his room. "Get some rest, old man," says Danny, handing him two pills. Mr. Hudson looks at the pills, a little puzzled. "They're for nausea," says Danny. "The gravity change could start to bother you."

Mr. Hudson puts the pills in his pocket and enters his room. As he starts to close the door behind him, Laura sticks her thin head between the narrow crack in the open door. "I hope you realize how hard this is on my schedule," she says.

"I do," says Mr. Hudson.

"Now get some sleep," says Laura. "Tomorrow is a busy day."

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Mr. Hudson undresses in the dark, crawls into bed and tries to feel sorry for Laura. But all he can think about is the old woman he ran over, the old woman who will always think he is a jackass.

One New Year's morning, Laura, up earlier than usual, called a family meeting. This was becoming an annual tradition in the Severs household, so Mr. Hudson wasn't surprised when he heard his daughter hollering from the kitchen. "Come on, Daddy; we're waiting for you."

"I don't know why we have to do this," said Danny, poking a skillet of scrambled eggs with a wooden spoon. Danny's Sunday breakfasts were usually the highlight of Mr. Hudson's week. "I think I'm ready to vote," said Danny.

Laura was not amused. "You need to take this seriously," she snapped. "Daddy's turning ninety-four next month, and the longevity tax is going to go up another two percent."

"Happy birthday to me," said Mr. Hudson, shuffling into the kitchen. He took a seat at the kitchen table as Danny set a plate of eggs in front of him.

"It just isn't getting any easier, and it's time we really talk about this. And I don't mean just joking around like you two always do." She dropped a canvas bag onto the kitchen table and pulled out a handful of pamphlets. "Here are some Smooth Passing brochures I think we should all look at." This was new to Mr. Hudson; Laura didn't usually bring handouts to family meetings. She passed a brochure to Danny and another to Mr. Hudson, then took one herself and opened it.

"Welcome to Smooth Passing," said the brochure.

Laura muted the sound and held the brochure at chest level as if she were holding a prayer book. She cleared her throat, arched her back and began to read: "Smooth Passing Incorporated encourages all families to review their passing plans every year." She paused to look at Danny and Mr. Hudson, giving it that personal touch. "With the increasing cost of living, not to mention the needless drain on scarce resources, there comes a time when you need to say you can't, and probably shouldn't, live forever." She paused to let the words sink in. She had obviously rehearsed. "Smooth Passing encourages every family to review their plans at the beginning of each year. After all, you're already making resolutions."

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"My resolution is to live to be one hundred," said Mr. Hudson.

"You're not getting any younger, Daddy," growled Laura, pumping her arms up and down in front of her chest as if she were digging holes with some invisible shovel. "Don't you understand?"

"Yes," whispered Mr. Hudson. He felt bad for joking around after Laura had warned him not to.

"I think it's time," said Laura, holding the brochure out for Danny to take. "His good years are gone, and I think we all know that."

"I don't," said Danny.

Mr. Hudson didn't say a word. The whole thing was beginning to wear on him, making him dread every New Year's Day — no — making him dread *every* day. He had tried to cooperate. He had been to doctors, four different doctors, only to get the same disappointing response: "Really, he's fine, there's nothing we can do." Laura hated hearing that.

"Jack, what do you think?" asked Danny.

"I don't know anymore," said Mr. Hudson. "Maybe it's time."

"I have a form," said Laura, seizing the opportunity. "We can take him to the Moon where you don't have to go through all the trouble you do down here."

Laura laid the form out on the table. It was a standard form printed on electronic parchment, official-looking, yet elegant, certainly suitable for framing.

"Jack, you don't have to do this," said Danny.

"He'll sign," said Laura. "Daddy's always had common sense."

"Damn it, Laura, I don't think it's time."

"We can at least apply," pleaded Laura. "Smooth Passing doesn't take these things lightly. They won't even accept the application unless it's the right thing to do."

"I've never heard of them rejecting anyone," said Danny.

"Of course they do," said Laura. "They carefully review every application. They actually take fourteen factors into account. It says so in the brochure."

"It's just an application," Mr. Hudson said to Danny in the most soothing tone he could muster.

"And it's not only age they consider, Daddy," said Laura, as intense and eloquent as Mr. Hudson had ever seen her. "Age is just one small

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consideration. They'll look at a lot of things. They'll study records from your whole life. And you can cancel at any time. If we all sign, any one of us can cancel. Even on the Moon."

"All right," said Mr. Hudson.

Laura handed the form to Danny. "You need to be part of this too," she said. "Everything's always on me."

Danny took the form. "What do you really think, Jack? Because if you're not sure...." Danny's voice trailed into nothingness.

"Let's get it over with," said Mr. Hudson.

Danny took the form, pulled a pen out of his pocket, and began to write, slowly, reluctantly. When he had finished, he signed the form and authenticated it by placing his thumb on a tiny stamp next to the signature block. He handed the form to Mr. Hudson who signed it without question.

"Well, let's not draw this out all day," said Laura. Danny laid the form in front of Laura and pointed to the block for her to sign. She whipped off a quick signature. A metallic block at the bottom of the page flashed red three times and then turned a steady green.

"Looks like it took," said Danny.

"Good," said Laura. "We should have an answer within a few days."

"I'm not real happy about this," said Danny.

"I don't care," said Laura, storming out of the room as Danny folded the form into a neat square and slipped it into his shirt pocket.

MR. HUDSON is on the Moon, and he knows why he is there — he has lived too long. It's not his fault. He hasn't done anything special to make it to ninety-four. For sixty years he smoked a pipe, three bowls a day of a rich Cavendish tobacco, but that was before he moved in with Laura and Danny. He used to drink too — mostly scotch and brandy. He has had no organ replacements or bodily enhancements. He has never exercised for more than a couple of weeks at a time. He can't remember having ever taken a vitamin. But here he is, almost a century old, still plugging along. One more day. One more day on the Moon.

Mr. Hudson wakes at eight o'clock, lunar time. Across the room an oval mirror with an antique frame hangs above a sink no more than one

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large step from the foot of his bed. He hadn't noticed how small the room was the night before, but now it seems little more than a tight box. The bed itself takes up a third of the space.

Mr. Hudson rises, steps to the mirror, and gazes at his own reflection. "You're nothing but an old jackass," he says, applying shaving lotion to his whiskers. He watches the stubble melt away, then rinses the film from his face. Mr. Hudson's suitcase, delivered sometime during the night, stands next to the sink, but he puts on yesterday's clothes and dons the gravity-compensating boots and belt. He takes one more long look into the mirror and sets out to explore Smooth Passing.

Many guests are already up, some moving with purpose down the corridor, others just milling about, looking at faded pictures of the Moon hanging on the walls. Mr. Hudson moves with purpose, now barely aware of the gravity change.

As he reaches the end of the corridor, Laura shouts from behind: "Daddy, it's good to see you." She rushes to his side. "This is your big day."

"Big day," says Mr. Hudson.

"Danny and I are going for a Moon tour. Do you want to come?"

"No," says Mr. Hudson. "I'm a little tired." But he isn't; he isn't tired at all.

"We're going to see where Neil Armstead first stepped on the Moon," says Laura.

"I think I'll stay around here."

"You should come," says Danny, joining them. "We should spend this day together." He lays his hand gently on Mr. Hudson's shoulder.

"Go on," says Mr. Hudson. "I'll be fine."

"We would stay with you, Daddy," says Laura, "but I may never get to the Moon again." She gives her father a big hug. "We'll spend some time together tonight. I promise."

"Wonderful," says Mr. Hudson.

"Do be careful," says Laura, looking around. "There are a lot of people here I don't trust."

After Laura and Danny leave for their tour, Mr. Hudson steps into the lobby. He follows the perimeter of the dome, past The Moonwalk Café where a few androwaiters are laying out breakfast servings.

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"I'm looking for a woman," says Mr. Hudson.

"Aren't we all?" says an androwaiter.

Mr. Hudson winces. "I mean a specific woman."

"What is her name?"

"I don't know," says Mr. Hudson.

"What is she wearing?"

"I'm not sure. It could be a pink dress."

"How old is she?"

"About ninety or so, I would guess."

"That limits the selections to thirty-four. Would you like to have a porter show them to you?"

"No thanks," says Mr. Hudson. "I'll just look around."

Mr. Hudson circles the dome several times, studying every face he meets. Occasionally, he cuts through the heart of the dome to make sure he has left no recess unsearched. He finds a lot of women, several women in pink, and even one old woman in pink. Just not the one he is looking for. He is about to go back to his room when he looks up.

Mr. Hudson follows "Viewing Platform This Way" signs to a set of stairs beside an elevator. He climbs the stairs faster than any ninety-four-year-old man should and finally comes to a large deck, bordered by guard rails on one side and an enormous, dark window on the other. Mr. Hudson looks out the window. He knows he is looking onto the surface of the Moon but can't make out much except a few blurred shapes.

In front of the window, planted in a long trough, grows an immaculate row of small, yellow tulips protected by a glass shell. Between the tulip and the window, scrolls a banner: *Smooth Passing is proud to honor Karen Jenkins, Gary Falmouth, Arnett Jones, and Sarah Birdsong.*

"So, what do you think?" asks a voice from behind. Mr. Hudson turns and sees the woman in pink, only she isn't wearing pink now; she is dressed in white. "Is it like you thought it would be?" she asks.

Mr. Hudson wants to speak, but his tongue is dead and his lips are frozen. The old woman steps to Mr. Hudson's side and stares out the window. "There they are," she says with fascination.

"Hard to see them," says Mr. Hudson, finally forcing a few words out.

"If you're having trouble, look away from the glass," says the old woman. "At least that's what the brochure says."

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Mr. Hudson looks down at the tulips; one is marred by an orange blemish on one petal. Suddenly four urns pop into focus on the surface of the Moon. They are carved out of stone, tastefully lit by aimed spotlights, and spaced with plenty of room for more urns later.

"So what do you think of them?" asks the old woman.

"Who are they?"

"Today's honorees."

"On the Moon forever?" asks Mr. Hudson, talking easier now.

"Is that so bad?" asks the old woman.

"It seems a little out of the way," says Mr. Hudson. Laura had described the Smooth Passing interment policies to him, but they hadn't seemed real until now.

"Think of it more as a quiet, secluded spot," says the old woman. "By the way, my name is Susan, Susan Weiss."

"I'm Jack," says Mr. Hudson, and then adds, without even thinking about it, "but I'm not a jackass."

Susan looks at Mr. Hudson, puzzled. "Did I say you were?" she asks, considering the possibility.

"You did," says Mr. Hudson, "yesterday."

"Oh, yes," she says with recognition. "I'm usually right about those things. I think I'll need more proof than just your word."

Mr. Hudson lays his hand on the glass shell above the fragile tulip with the blemish. "I would pluck you a flower to show how charming I really am, but they are hard to get to."

"That's for protection," says Susan.

"From radiation?"

"From tulip pluckers; the radiation isn't bad here." Susan gently strokes the glass shell with one finger. "Besides, you wouldn't want to pluck these tulips."

"I wouldn't?"

"They're special. Called Janet's Tulips. Named after Smooth Passing's first customer."

"Lucky her," says Mr. Hudson.

"She brought them with her. I used to plant this kind every fall on Earth." Susan tugs at the brochure sticking out of Mr. Hudson's hip pocket. "Didn't you study up before you came?"

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"Never got past the opening picture," says Mr. Hudson. "I was afraid it might spoil the surprises."

"Well I hope you know the ending or you're in for a real shock."

"I do know the ending," says Mr. Hudson. "I do."

Mr. Hudson is on the Moon, and he knows why he is there — he has lived too long. So has Susan. They descend the stairs and stroll to the garden where, beside copper trees and robotic squirrels, they talk all morning. At noon they eat Crater Salads at The Moonwalk Café. After sharing an order of apple slices for dessert, they walk some more. They really don't know where they are going; they are just going, walking slowly.

"How will it happen?" asks Mr. Hudson.

"You mean tonight?"

"Yes."

"I don't know," says Susan. "Kind of a trade secret."

"Of course," says Mr. Hudson.

"It won't hurt. The form guarantees that."

"I didn't read the form," says Mr. Hudson.

Susan takes Mr. Hudson by the hand. "Come with me," she says, leading him down a corridor to a set of wooden doors, old and out of place here, unpainted, unvarnished.

"What is this place?" asks Mr. Hudson.

"The sign on the door says it can be either a church, a temple, or a pub," says Susan. "We can go in for fifty an hour. For a hundred you get drinks."

Mr. Hudson searches his pockets. "This should last us for a while," he says, pulling out his last coin and handing it to Susan. "Make it with drinks."

Susan slides the coin into a slot and presses a button marked "pub." The sign on the door flashes PLEASE WAIT five times and then changes to a steady ENTER.

The pub is a dark, narrow room with a bar on one end and three stark, wooden tables on the other. Short, plump, human-looking figures sit on benches at two of the tables. Four of the figures look like men and three like women, but they all look sad and grotesque, hunched over small, metal mugs.

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"Who are they?" whispers Mr. Hudson.

"I guess they're androdrunks," says Susan. "Probably for atmosphere."

Mr. Hudson slips by the shortest, ugliest figure and makes his way to the bar where an androtender waits for him, dishtowel draped neatly over one arm.

"I'll have a scotch," says Mr. Hudson. "On the rocks."

The androtender pours the drink, sets it down in front of Mr. Hudson, and says, "O Grave, where is thy victory?"

"Excuse me?" asks Mr. Hudson.

The androtender puts down the bottle of scotch, picks up a cracked glass, and washes it.

"What did you say?" asks Mr. Hudson.

The androtender looks into Mr. Hudson's eyes. "Earth to earth," he says.

Mr. Hudson turns to Susan. "Shouldn't he be saying things like 'What'll it be' and 'Nice weather we're having'?"

"Looks like the wrong soundtrack," says Susan.

"And I spent my last coin. Can't even step out and reload the bar."

"Is the drink any good?" asks Susan.

Mr. Hudson sniffs the scotch then sucks a drop onto his tongue. "It's excellent," he says.

"Then it's okay," says Susan, turning to order a gin and tonic.

The androtender makes Susan's drink without a single wasted motion. "I will fear no evil," he says. Susan takes her drink and sits down at the vacant table where Mr. Hudson joins her.

"To health," says Mr. Hudson, raising his glass.

"And long life," laughs Susan.

Susan sips at her drink and stares at the bar. The androtender is back to washing glasses. "Do you fear evil?" she asks, turning to Mr. Hudson.

Mr. Hudson has never been asked this question before, at least not in this way. He thinks about it for a moment and then replies, "All the time."

"So do I," says Susan.

Early afternoon slips into late evening. Mr. Hudson and Susan have moved all the androdrunks to their table. They are not really programmed

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for conversation, but they make wonderful listeners with a few appropriate comments: "Ah, yes, I see what you mean — Do go on — I always thought so myself."

"Do you think we have drunk too much?" asks Susan.

"That depends," says Mr. Hudson.

"On what?"

"Do you still think I'm a jackass?"

Susan considers the question. "Does it really matter?" she asks.

"It does," he says.

Susan thinks for a moment and raises her glass. "To jackasses."

"To jackasses," toasts Mr. Hudson, "and tulips."

Susan drinks to the toast, sets her glass on the table, and stares down at her ice cubes. "I guess I'm done growing tulips," she says.

"Ah, yes, I see what you mean," says an androdrunk.

"Maybe we should slow down on the drinks," says Mr. Hudson.

"Yes," says Susan, "I would hate to feel bad in the morning."

"Dust to Dust," says the androtender.

The front door of the pub swings open. "Jack," says Danny, stepping into the room, "I think it's time."

Laura storms in with an androporter close behind. "We've been looking for you, Daddy," she says.

"It's getting late," says Danny. "You probably haven't even had dinner yet."

"I'm not hungry," says Mr. Hudson. And he isn't; he isn't hungry at all.

"I think it's time for Daddy to go to bed," says Laura.

"Just a little longer," says Mr. Hudson. "We were toasting."

"You've had all day," says Laura. "It's time to come with us now."

Mr. Hudson looks at Susan.

"It's all right," says Susan. "We've had a good day."

"Come on, old man," says Danny. "I'll walk you to your room."

Susan stands, picks up her drink, and raises it high. "To the next step," she toasts.

"To the next step," says Mr. Hudson.

Laura and Danny walk Mr. Hudson back to his room. "How are you feeling, Daddy?" asks Laura.

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"I'm tired," he says. It is true; he is tired.

"Then you should get some sleep," says Laura.

"I'll see you in the morning," he says, without thinking.

"No, you won't," says Danny. "You understand that, don't you? You won't see her in the morning."

"I understand," says Mr. Hudson. "Good night."

"Good night, Daddy," says Laura. "I'm going to miss you."

Mr. Hudson closes his bedroom door, undresses in the dark, and lies down on the bed. He falls asleep thinking of tulips.

MR. HUDSON OPENS his eyes and stares into darkness. At least he thinks they're open. He waves his fingers in front of his face. He sees nothing. He touches his nose. His nose has feeling; his fingers smell of scotch. He is alive. Mr. Hudson turns on the lights and squints at his hazy reflection in the mirror across the room. He is alive. Being alive has never surprised him before. He has actually gotten very used to it, but today he finds it strangely unsettling.

This is a very poor day for Mr. Hudson to be alive. His throat is dry; his eyes are pushing their way to the back of his skull. Too much scotch.

What went wrong? Mr. Hudson wants to call someone; he wants an explanation, but he doesn't know who to call or what to do. He pulls on his clothes and goes to Danny's room as fast as he can, but he is tired and moving slowly today. He knocks on the door, but there is no answer. "Danny!" he calls. Nothing. "Danny!" Nothing. Laura's room, next to Danny's, is vacant too.

An androporter, busily making his early morning rounds, whizzes by. "Help," says Mr. Hudson. The androporter slides to stop and turns around. "I'm looking for Mr. Severs," pleads Mr. Hudson.

The androporter makes quick calculations and, without a word, takes Mr. Hudson to the stairs leading to the viewing platform. At the top of the stairs, Mr. Hudson finds Danny, motionless, looking out a dark window onto the surface of the Moon.

"Danny," says Mr. Hudson, his voice weak and lifeless.

"Old man," says Danny, without turning around.

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Mr. Hudson moves closer. "It didn't work," he says. He wants to reach out and touch Danny, but he doesn't.

"What didn't work?" asks Danny.

"Smooth Passing made some kind of mistake," says Mr. Hudson.

"Smooth Passing doesn't make mistakes," says Danny, staring intensely at his own reflection.

"I don't understand," say Mr. Hudson.

"Did you know there were tulips up here?" asks Danny.

"Yes," says Mr. Hudson, looking down at the perfect row of yellow flowers. Five urns snap into focus on the surface of the Moon. The scrolling banner behind the tulips matches names to urns: *Smooth Passing is proud to honor Harold Davis, Philip Gilbert, Susan Weiss, Jackie Halloway, and Laura Severs.*

Mr. Hudson sways, dips low, and almost falls.

"Are you all right, old man?" asks Danny reaching out to catch him. He holds Mr. Hudson tight, straining to lift his enormous bulk.

Mr. Hudson stabilizes himself in a crouch and stares at Laura's urn. "This isn't what she wanted," he moans.

"She signed the form," says Danny. He loosens one hand from under Mr. Hudson's left arm, pulls the sheet of electronic parchment out of his pocket, and hands it to Mr. Hudson. Mr. Hudson unfolds the form and reads Laura's name immaculately printed on a line labeled "Honoree."

"You put Laura's name on the form?" asks Mr. Hudson.

Danny says nothing.

"Did she ever know?" Mr. Hudson can remember Laura signing the form; it seems clear, as clear as if it has just happened. But did she read it? For some reason he can't remember that. But they had reviewed the form since arriving on the Moon. Hadn't they? "Did she know?" Mr. Hudson asks again, trying to sort the scattered thoughts spinning around in his head.

"Smooth Passing reviews every application," says Danny, echoing Laura's words. "They would never have accepted the application unless it was the right thing to do."

Mr. Hudson stands up, steps away from Danny and moves close to the window. He stares out onto the bleak landscape and forces the center urn, Susan's urn, into focus. It seems a little larger than the others.

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"Was that your friend from last night?" asks Danny.

Mr. Hudson stares at the delicate flowers carved into the stone urn and says nothing.

"She seemed nice," continues Danny.

"She wanted to grow tulips," whispers Mr. Hudson.

"We should grow some tulips when we get home," says Danny. "If you want to."

"That would be nice," says Mr. Hudson, turning to stroke the glass above the blemished tulip.

"I wonder who brought tulips to the Moon?" asks Danny.

Mr. Hudson turns to look out the window one last time as he and Danny descend the stairs.

Mr. Hudson is on the Moon, and he knows why he is there.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

THOSE OF US with the power to see the future (it's easy once you know the trick) predict 2008 will bring good things. Such as:

"Mystery Hill," by Alex Irvine, a charming transdimensional tale of the Michigan backwoods, starring: one ornery owner of a tourist trap, one pretty, smart (mind that comma in there!) professor, some suspicious hooch, and a mini-golf course. This one's on tap for next month.

"Pride and Prometheus," by John Kessel, in which we learn that certain truths, while universally acknowledged, possibly go against natural laws. Indeed, it is a fantasy most interesting in which readers shall be invested, courtesy of dear Mr. Kessel.

"The Twilight Year," by Sean McMullen, which takes us to the British Isles during the last days of the Roman Empire, when strange things are in the air — including something that might possibly be magic....

Our inventory contains a wide variety of other stories, including new works by Terry Bisson, James L. Cambias, Albert E. Cowdrey, Ron Goulart, Michaela Roessner, and Kate Wilhelm. We have comedies and tragedies in store, visions of the future and ventures into the past, worlds that have not come to be and worlds that never were. Go to *www.fsfmag.com* and give someone a subscription. They'll thank you all year long.

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

FLAVORLESS, ODORLESS, SOULLESS

UNDER ordinary circumstances I would begin by slagging the producers, the director, the retard actors, everyone associated with *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer*. I'd mention their impoverished intellects and impotent imaginations. I'd ridicule their children, slander their girl/boyfriends, talk trash about their housepets...and maybe I'll get around to that. But first I have to admit something: I was all geeked up for this one. In some aberrant plane or dimension, I've painted myself silver and fabricated a board from papier-mâché, and I'm strolling into the theater at the head of a gibbering fanboy army. I mean, the Surfer, man. The Herald of Galactus, the gigantic dude in the mauve-and-black power suit who treats planets like hors d'oeuvres. Owner of an FTL fully chromed board and a body to match, resembling the niftiest hood ornament ever. Talks like he's carrying a portable reverb unit through which he intones neat stuff such as, "All you know is at an end." Has a mystical, Christ-like cachet and possesses nearly the same absence of expression and inflection as Clint Eastwood.

How cool is that?

So you might assume that I was hoping the movie didn't suck.

Oh, well.

Since making *Barbershop*, a clichéd yet charming little picture about the barbers and clientele of an African-American barbershop, director Tim Story appears to have had something crucial removed at a lobotomy clinic. His subsequent movie, the formulaic dud *Taxi*, sought to make a star out of a second-rate comedian named Jimmy Fallon, and compared to *Rise of the*

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Silver Surfer, *Barbershop* had the gravitas of Dostoyevsky and the emotional nuance of Jane Austen. We're talking about a movie based on a comic book here, about what is commonly described as "summer fun" (review-speak for "schlock"), but using any standard you select, *Surfer* grades out at a solid F. Given an end-of-the-world scenario, several competent actors, and a heroic villain with the potential for mystery and intrigue of the Surfer, Story and script-hacks Don Payne and Mark Frost (both of whom once did credible work, Payne on *The Simpsons* and Frost on *Twin Peaks* and *Hill Street Blues*) have turned all this into an affectless jumble of scenes. Story seems to have no idea of how to evoke a mood, let alone sustain one, and thus the specter of cosmic doom plays out as if it were a problem only a tad more consequential than a wedding-day zit on Sue Storm's (Jessica Alba's) forehead, with the draining of the Thames, the near-destruction of the London Eye, and the splintering of the Great Wall of China being treated as annoying impediments to her union with Mr. Fantastic, Plasticman clone Reed Richards (Ioan Gruffudd). The plot can be best summarized as a headline:

WORLD ENDS — STORM-RICHARDS NUPTIALS POSTPONED

I can't recall a single issue of the comic that generated less suspense or, for that matter, had less of a kinetic feeling.

The Surfer (played by Doug Jones, voiced by Laurence Fishburne) first appears as a comet circling the Earth, causing snowstorms in Egypt, seas to harden, and enormous craters to open in the crust. The FF soon learn that the comet has left a trail of dead worlds in its wake — it looks as if our world is next. In their efforts to thwart this menace, the FF is assisted by General Hager (Andre Braugher, a fine actor who, though utterly wasted here, does his best to enliven the lazily written dialog, but essentially has a Time of Death stamped on his forehead), and by Dr. Doom, embodied (yet *not* enlivened) by Julian McMahon of *Nip/Tuck*, who plays the FF's old nemesis as if alternately possessed by fits of boredom and pique. Chris Evans is provided the opportunity to display his torso (recently voted the third hottest body on Gay.com) in his role as the Human Torch, and the talented Michael Chiklis rumbles along as the Thing, mostly in the

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service of comic relief...but since the film is basically a poorly made sitcom, there is scant relief to be had.

The FX range from good to shoddy. In one sequence, the Torch chases the Surfer through the canyons of Manhattan and then into the upper atmosphere, where the Surfer, with an offhanded gesture, discards his unconscious body, allowing it to fall back toward the Earth. That gesture perfectly captures the ambiguous essence of the Surfer's character and the sequence succeeds in bringing the comic to vivid life. But this along with a few other moments are the only times that the words "vivid" or "life" can be associated with the picture, and whoever decided to transform Galactus into the Mother of All Dust Bunnies.... Well, let's just say that it was an unfortunate creative choice. True, portraying the Eater of Worlds as he was in the comic would have looked dopey on screen; but a vast figure could have been suggested, embedded in the debris storm that surrounds him, and this would have had a far more sinister effect.

The sole value of movies like *Rise of the Silver Surfer*, flavorless, odorless, soulless product, is that they provide a register for the flatlining of our culture — not of its intelligence, really, but of its will to excel and to strive. We have ceased as a nation to demand of our government other than that we be permitted to survive each successive administration. Instead of desiring to confront the significant challenges that face us, we cling to the status quo as if it were a raft on a stormy sea. In the realm of entertainment, we increasingly seek out the undemanding, saying that life is challenging enough and when we go to the movies, we want to be entertained, thereby equating entertainment with comfort food. Only the most dewy-eyed of Pollyannas would claim that the world is not in trouble, that the fabric of society is not developing a few rips, yet it might be more interesting, more entertaining, and certainly more pertinent, to examine the culture through the lens of a camera, rather than burying our heads in buckets of buttered popcorn.

I once had a Swedish editor tell me, after buying one of my books, that he was going against the grain of Swedish publishing by purchasing a science fiction book, because the Swedes didn't believe in the future. This view is borne out in two recent Scandinavian films, both

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winners of multiple awards and now available on DVD. The first, *The Bothersome Man*, a curious and disturbing film directed by Norwegian Jens Lien, may be a depiction of the afterlife, either hell or a misbegotten heaven, or it may simply be a bleakly comedic view of urban life, perceived as a river of hopelessness barely contained beneath a veneer of modernist décor and empty relationships...or it may be all of the above. Its protagonist, Andreas (Trond Fausa Aurvaag), a distraught-looking forty-year-old, appears to throw himself in front of an oncoming train after watching a couple making out in a subway station. The next moment he's getting off a bus at a café in the midst of a desert where, shortly thereafter, he is picked up by a driver and conveyed to an unnamed city and a new job as an accountant in a successful firm whose purpose seems, to say the least, poorly defined. His boss and co-workers treat him with a vague amiability, and before long he finds himself in a kinda-sorta arranged marriage with an interior designer, Anne Britt (Petronella Barker), whose lacquered hair and compliant manner go well with their furniture. Anne Britt and Andreas fall into a routine centering around dinner parties, making home improvements, and bouts of sex that can best be described as mechanical.

The world Andreas finds himself in has a distinct *Prisoner* vibe, but is even more surreal. Everyone smiles and is unrelentingly even-tempered, yet is infected with a lassitude that verges upon the moribund. Sex is joyless, food is tasteless (literally), alcohol doesn't get you drunk, and there are no children. And when Andreas accidentally slices off a finger, he discovers that it grows back. Afflicted by the ennui and despair that initially drove him to attempt suicide, he makes another attempt, throwing himself once again in front of a subway train; but he survives with nothing to show for it except a bloody shirt. Soon thereafter he notices cracks in the veneer of city life, beginning with a literal crack in an acquaintance's cellar, the exploration of which leads him to a partial understanding of his circumstance and to think that there may be a way out.

If you have seen Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville*, or Andrew Niccol's *Gattaca*, then *The Bothersome Man* may seem to tread upon familiar — perhaps overly familiar — ground, and, at times, appears to be too much in love with its own cleverness.

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But Lien's dystopian vision (leavened with a deadpan humor reminiscent of the films of masterful Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki) is achieved with such confidence and skill, such an economy of dialog and a cold precision of image, it overwhelms these flaws and impresses itself on the brain with the force of a recurring nightmare.

Roy Andersson makes TV commercials, the best commercials in the world, according to no less a personage than fellow Swede, the late director Ingmar Bergman. Indeed, his picture, *Songs from the Second Floor*, the most acclaimed Swedish film in many years, might have been made by Bergman in the midst of a belladonna trip. Using amateur actors (his protagonist, Lars Nordh, who plays Kalle, a merchant who has burned down his store for the insurance, was discovered shopping at Ikea), Andersson evokes a generic, modern-day city and a whiny, pasty-skinned populace whose single apparent virtue is their brutish endurance. In a series of loosely connected vignettes, we see a crowd of business types parading through the streets, beating each other with knotted ropes; we meet refugees from an enormous and perhaps permanent traffic jam; we encounter a magician who has cut into a man's stomach while essaying the saw-someone-in-half trick; a crucifix salesman who wonders how he ever thought to make money off a "crucified loser"; a group of burghers who, in an effort to ward off the end times, sacrifice a bright young girl by pushing her off a cliff; the ghost of a suicide to whom Kalle owed a large sum of money, a debt that caused the man to take his own life; Kalle's catatonic son who went mad from writing poetry in praise of the enervated and the doomed; and a centenarian general who squats on a bedpan in a crib, salutes the memory of Hermann Göring, and — alone at night — cries out for help.

Andersson's beautifully composed shots, striking images, and elegant, static camera made the film worth watching for me, but I can't recommend a picture that is little more than a carnival of despair. It occurred to me while watching that this wallowing in the gloom of the millennial West may be what passes for comfort food in Sweden, and that Andersson's grim austerity and absurdist dialog were the cinematic equivalents of *Rise of the Silver Surfer*'s trashy brightness and vacuous banter. The two films were engendered, it seems, by the same cynical world view, only packaged differently, the first as an art film

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that won the Jury Prize at Cannes, the other as disposable product that will win a week or two at the box office, yet both testifying to an abject hopelessness, to the abandonment of art as a tool for change, and to our overall surrender to the implacable forces that threaten us. I imagine them as two cheerleading squads, one wearing uniforms sporting an N for Nihil on their chests, slack, unenergetic blonds raggedly intoning some dire chant, saying essentially the same thing as do the second squad in a bouncier, perkier style, shaking their pompoms in a dumb show of delight and fraudulent enthusiasm, and with, I suppose, a W emblazoned on their sweaters.

She Rides

By Sophie M. White

She rides
Through the silver cedar forest
Past lindworm hatcheries
Past the tombs of the glowing dead
And the dull living.

She rides
While cursed mooncalves
With skin like mildewed leather
Lope and lumber behind
And the wyvern circle above.

She rides
Toward the city carved in a mountain
To leave the Once Upon
To be with the Ever After.

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David Moles says he was born on the anniversary of the R101 disaster, which means this issue will come off the presses shortly after his birthday. He has lived on three continents, with Europe (specifically, Switzerland) serving as home these days. His short stories and verse have appeared in Asimov's, Polyphony, Rabid Transit, *and* Strange Horizons, *among others. He also co-edited (with different co-editors) both* Twenty Epics *and* All-Star Zeppelin Adventure Stories, *and he says the inspiration for "Finisterra" was an illustration by the cover artist for those two anthologies, Lara Wells. Her Vermeer-influenced piece depicting a woman surrounded by airship design drawings and models of ornithopters immediately conjured up this story's protagonist.*

Finisterra

By David Moles

1. ENCANTADA

BIANCA NAZARIO STANDS at the end of the world.

The firmament above is as blue as the summer skies of her childhood, mirrored in the waters of *la caldera*; but where the skies she remembers were bounded by mountains, here on Sky there is no real horizon, only a line of white cloud. The white line shades into a diffuse grayish fog that, as Bianca looks down, grows progressively murkier, until the sky directly below is thoroughly dark and opaque.

She remembers what Dinh told her about the ways Sky could kill her. With a large enough parachute, Bianca imagines, she could fall for hours, drifting through the layered clouds, before finding her end in heat or pressure or the jaws of some monstrous denizen of the deep air.

If this should go wrong, Bianca cannot imagine a better way to die.

Bianca works her way out a few hundred meters along the base of one of Encantada's ventral fins, stopping when the dry red dirt beneath her feet

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begins to give way to scarred gray flesh. She takes a last look around: at the pall of smoke obscuring the *zaratán*'s tree-lined dorsal ridge, at the fin she stands on, curving out and down to its delicate-looking tip, kilometers away. Then she knots her scarf around her skirted ankles and shrugs into the paraballoon harness, still warm from the bungalow's fabricators. As the harness tightens itself around her, she takes a deep breath, filling her lungs. The wind from the burning camp smells of wood smoke and pine resin, enough to overwhelm the taint of blood from the killing ground.

Blessed Virgin, she prays, be my witness: this is no suicide.

This is a prayer for a miracle.

She leans forward.

She falls.

2. *The Flying Archipelago*

The boat-like anemopter that Valadez had sent for them had a cruising speed of just less than the speed of sound, which in this part of Sky's atmosphere meant about nine hundred kilometers per hour. The speed, Bianca thought, might have been calculated to bring home the true size of Sky, the impossible immensity of it. It had taken the better part of their first day's travel for the anemopter's point of departure, the ten-kilometer, billion-ton vacuum balloon *Transient Meridian*, to drop from sight — the dwindling golden droplet disappearing, not over the horizon, but into the haze. From that Bianca estimated that the bowl of clouds visible through the subtle blurring of the anemopter's static fields covered an area about the size of North America.

She heard a plastic clattering on the deck behind her and turned to see one of the anemopter's crew, a globular, brown-furred alien with a collection of arms like furry snakes, each arm tipped with a mouth or a round and curious eye. The *firija* were low-gravity creatures; the ones Bianca had seen on her passage from Earth had tumbled joyously through the *Caliph of Baghdad*'s inner ring spaces like so many radially symmetrical monkeys. The three aboard the anemopter, in Sky's heavier gravity, had to make do with spindly-legged walking machines. There was a droop in their arms that was both comical and melancholy.

"Come forward," this one told Bianca in fractured Arabic, its voice

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like an ensemble of reed pipes. She thought it was the one that called itself Ismaíl. "Make see archipelago."

She followed it forward to the anemopter's rounded prow. The naturalist, Erasmus Fry, was already there, resting his elbows on the rail, looking down.

"Pictures don't do them justice, do they?" he said.

Bianca went to the rail and followed the naturalist's gaze. She did her best to maintain a certain stiff formality around Fry; from their first meeting aboard *Transient Meridian* she'd had the idea that it might not be good to let him get too familiar. But when she saw what Fry was looking at, the mask slipped for a moment; she couldn't help a sharp, quick intake of breath.

Fry chuckled. "To stand on the back of one," he said, "to stand in a valley and look up at the hills and know that the ground under your feet is supported by the bones of a living creature — there's nothing else like it." He shook his head.

At this altitude they were above all but the highest-flying of the thousands of beasts that made up Septentrionalis Archipelago. Bianca's eyes tried to make the herd (or flock, or school) of *zaratanes* into other things: a chain of islands, yes, if she concentrated on the colors, the greens and browns of forests and plains, the grays and whites of the snowy highlands; a fleet of ships, perhaps, if she instead focused on the individual shapes, the keel ridges, the long, translucent fins, ribbed like Chinese sails.

The *zaratanes* of the archipelago were more different from one another than the members of a flock of birds or a pod of whales, but still there was a symmetry, a regularity of form, the basic anatomical plan — equal parts fish and mountain — repeated throughout, in fractal detail from the great old shape of Zaratán Finisterra, a hundred kilometers along the dorsal ridge, down to the merely hill-sized bodies of the nameless younger beasts. When she took in the archipelago as a whole, it was impossible for Bianca not to see the *zaratanes* as living things.

"Nothing else like it," Fry repeated.

Bianca turned reluctantly from the view to look at Fry. The naturalist spoke Spanish with a flawless Miami accent, courtesy, he'd said, of a Consilium language module. Bianca was finding it hard to judge the ages

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of *extrañados*, particularly the men, but in Fry's case she thought he might be ten years older than Bianca's own forty, and unwilling to admit it — or ten years younger, and in the habit of treating himself very badly. On her journey here she'd met cyborgs and foreigners and artificial intelligences and several sorts of alien — some familiar, at least from media coverage of the *hajj*, and some strange — but the *extrañados* bothered her the most. It was hard to come to terms with the idea of humans born off Earth, humans who had never been to Earth or even seen it; humans who often had no interest in it.

"Why did you leave here, Mr. Fry?" she asked.

Fry laughed. "Because I didn't want to spend the rest of my life out *here*." With a hand, he swept the horizon. "Stuck on some Godforsaken floating island for years on end, with no one but researchers and feral refugees to talk to, nowhere to go for fun but some slum of a balloon station, nothing but a thousand kilometers of air between you and Hell?" He laughed again. "You'd leave, too, Nazario, believe me."

"Maybe I would," Bianca said. "But you're back."

"I'm here for the money," Fry said. "Just like you."

Bianca smiled and said nothing.

"You know," Fry said after a little while, "they have to kill the *zaratanes* to take them out of here." He looked at Bianca and smiled, in a way that was probably meant to be ghoulish. "There's no atmosphere ship big enough to lift a *zaratán* in one piece — even a small one. The poachers deflate them — gut them — flatten them out and roll them up. And even then, they throw out almost everything but the skin and bones."

"Strange," Bianca mused. Her mask was back in place. "There was a packet of material on the *zaratanes* with my contract; I watched most of it on the voyage. According to the packet, the Consilium considers the *zaratanes* a protected species."

Fry looked uneasy. Now it was Bianca's turn to chuckle.

"Don't worry, Mr. Fry," she said. "I may not know exactly what it is Mr. Valadez is paying me to do, but I've never had any illusion that it was legal."

Behind her, the *firija* made a fluting noise that might have been laughter.

* * *

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3. *The Steel Bird*

When Bianca was a girl, the mosque of Punta Aguila was the most prominent feature in the view from her fourth-floor window, a sixteenth-century structure of tensegrity cables and soaring catenary curves, its spreading white wings vaguely — but only vaguely — recalling the bird that gave the city its name. The automation that controlled the tension of the cables and adjusted the mosque's wings to match the shifting winds was hidden within the cables themselves, and was very old. Once, after the hurricane in the time of Bianca's grandfather, it had needed adjusting, and the old men of the *ayuntamiento* had been forced to send for *extrañado* technicians, at an expense so great that the *jizyah* of Bianca's time was still paying for it.

But Bianca rarely thought of that. Instead she would spend long hours surreptitiously sketching those white wings, calculating the weight of the structure and the tension of the cables, wondering what it would take to make the steel bird fly.

Bianca's father could probably have told her, but she never dared to ask. Raúl Nazario de Arenas was an aeronautical engineer, like the seven generations before him, and flight was the Nazarios' fortune; fully a third of the aircraft that plied the skies over the Rio Pícaro were types designed by Raúl or his father or his wife's father, on contract to the great *moro* trading and manufacturing families that were Punta Aguila's truly wealthy.

Because he worked for other men, and because he was a Christian, Raúl Nazario would never be as wealthy as the men who employed him, but his profession was an ancient and honorable one, providing his family with a more than comfortable living. If Raúl Nazario de Arenas thought of the mosque at all, it was only to mutter about the *jizyah* from time to time — but never loudly, because the Nazarios, like the other Christians of Punta Aguila, however valued, however ancient their roots, knew that they lived there only on sufferance.

But Bianca would sketch the aircraft, too, the swift gliders and lumbering flying boats and stately dirigibles, and these drawings she did not have to hide; in fact for many years her father would encourage her, explaining this and that aspect of their construction, gently correcting errors of proportion and balance in Bianca's drawings; would let her listen

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in while he taught the family profession to her brothers, Jesús the older, Pablo the younger.

This lasted until shortly before Bianca's *quinceañera*, when Jesús changed his name to Walíd and married a *moro*'s daughter, and Bianca's mother delivered a lecture concerning the difference between what was proper for a child and what was proper for a young Christian woman with hopes of one day making a good marriage.

It was only a handful of years later that Bianca's father died, leaving a teenaged Pablo at the helm of his engineering business; and only Bianca's invisible assistance and the pity of a few old clients had kept contracts and money coming into the Nazario household.

By the time Pablo was old enough to think he could run the business himself, old enough to marry the daughter of a musical instrument maker from Tierra Ceniza, their mother was dead, Bianca was thirty, and even if her dowry had been half her father's business, there was not a Christian man in Rio Pícaro who wanted it, or her.

And then one day Pablo told her about the *extrañado* contract that had been brought to the *ayuntamiento*, a contract that the *ayuntamiento* and the Guild had together forbidden the Christian engineers of Punta Aguila to bid on — a contract for a Spanish-speaking aeronautical engineer to travel a very long way from Rio Pícaro and be paid a very large sum of money indeed.

Three months later Bianca was in Quito, boarding an elevator car. In her valise was a bootleg copy of her father's engineering system, and a contract with the factor of a starship called the *Caliph of Baghdad*, for passage to Sky.

4. *The Killing Ground*

The anemopter's destination was a *zaratán* called Encantada, smaller than the giant Finisterra but still nearly forty kilometers from nose to tail, and eight thousand meters from gray-white keel to forested crest. From a distance of a hundred kilometers, Encantada was like a forested mountain rising from a desert plain, the clear air under its keel as dreamlike as a mirage. On her pocket system, Bianca called up pictures from Sky's network of the alpine ecology that covered the hills and valleys of

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Encantada's flanks: hardy grasses and small warm-blooded creatures and tall evergreens with spreading branches, reminding her of the pines and redwoods in the mountains west of Rio Pícaro.

For the last century or so Encantada had been keeping company with Zaratán Finisterra, holding its position above the larger beast's eastern flank. No one, apparently, knew the reason. Fry being the expert, Bianca had expected him to at least have a theory. He didn't even seem interested in the question.

"They're beasts, Nazario," he said. "They don't do things for reasons. We only call them animals and not plants because they bleed when we cut them."

They were passing over Finisterra's southern slopes. Looking down, Bianca saw brighter, warmer greens, more shades than she could count, more than she had known existed, the green threaded through with bright ribbons of silver water. She saw the anemopter's shadow, a dark oblong that rode the slopes and ridges, ringed by brightness — the faint reflection of Sky's sun behind them.

And just before the shadow entered the larger darkness that was the shadow of Encantada, Bianca watched it ride over something else: a flat green space carved out of the jungle, a suspiciously geometric collection of shapes that could only be buildings, the smudge of chimney smoke.

"Fry — " she started to say.

Then the village, if that's what it was, was gone, hidden behind the next ridge.

"What?" said Fry.

"I saw — I thought I saw — "

"People?" asked Fry. "You probably did."

"But I thought Sky didn't have any native sentients. Who are they?"

"Humans, mostly," Fry said. "Savages. Refugees. Drug farmers. Five generations of escaped criminals, and their kids, and *their* kids." The naturalist shrugged. "Once in a while, if the Consilium's looking for somebody in particular, the wardens might stage a raid, just for show. The rest of the time, the wardens fly their dope, screw their women...and otherwise leave them alone."

"But where do they come from?" Bianca asked.

"Everywhere," Fry said with another shrug. "Humans have been in

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this part of space for a long, long time. This is one of those places people end up, you know? People with nowhere else to go. People who can't fall any farther."

Bianca shook her head and said nothing.

The poacher camp on Encantada's eastern slope was invisible until they were almost upon it, hidden from the wardens' satellite eyes by layers of projected camouflage. Close up, the illusion seemed flat, its artificiality obvious, but it was still not until the anemopter passed through the projection that the camp itself could be seen: a clear-cut swath a kilometer wide and three times as long, stretching from the lower slopes of Encantada's dorsal ridge down to the edge of the *zaratán*'s cliff-like flank. Near the edge, at one corner, there was a small cluster of prefabricated bungalows; but at first it seemed to Bianca that most of the space was wasted.

Then she saw the red churned into the brown mud of the cleared strip, saw the way the shape of the terrain suggested the imprint of a gigantic, elongated body.

The open space was for killing.

"Sky is very poor, Miss Nazario," said Valadez, over his shoulder.

The poacher boss looked to be about fifty, stocky, his hair still black and his olive skin well-tanned but pocked with tiny scars. His Spanish was a dialect Bianca had never heard before, strange and lush, its vowels rich, its *h*s breathy as Bianca's *j*s, its *j*s warm and liquid as the *y*s of an Argentine. When he said *fuck your mother* — and already, in the hour or so Bianca had been in the camp, she had heard him say it several times, though never yet to her — the *madre* came out *madri*.

About half of the poachers were human, but Valadez seemed to be the only one who spoke Spanish natively; the rest used Sky's dialect of bazaar Arabic. Valadez spoke that as well, better than Bianca did, but she had the sense that he'd learned it late in life. If he had a first name, he was keeping it to himself.

"There are things on Sky that people want," Valadez went on. "But the *people* of Sky have nothing of interest to anybody. The companies that mine the deep air pay some royalties. But mostly what people live on here is Consilium handouts."

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The four of them — Bianca, Fry, and the *firija*, Ismaíl, who as well as being an anemopter pilot seemed to be Valadez's servant or business partner or bodyguard, or perhaps all three — were climbing the ridge above the poachers' camp. Below them workers, some human, some *firija*, a handful of other species, were setting up equipment: mobile machines that looked like they belonged on a construction site, pipes and cylindrical tanks reminiscent of a brewery or a refinery.

"I'm changing that, Miss Nazario." Valadez glanced over his shoulder at Bianca. "Off-world, there are people — like Ismaíl's people here" — he waved at the *firija* — "who like the idea of living on a floating island, and have the money to pay for one." He swept an arm, taking in the camp, the busy teams of workers. "With that money, I take boys out of the shantytowns of Sky's balloon stations and elevator gondolas. I give them tools, and teach them to kill beasts.

"To stop me — since they can't be bothered to do it themselves — the Consilium takes the same boys, gives them guns, and teaches them to kill men."

The poacher stopped and turned to face Bianca, jamming his hands into the pockets of his coat.

"Tell me, Miss Nazario — is one worse than the other?"

"I'm not here to judge you, Mr. Valadez," said Bianca. "I'm here to do a job."

Valadez smiled. "So you are."

He turned and continued up the slope. Bianca and the *firija* followed, Fry trailing behind. The path switchbacked through unfamiliar trees, dark, stunted, waxy-needled; these gave way to taller varieties, including some that Bianca would have sworn were ordinary pines and firs. She breathed deeply, enjoying the alpine breeze after the crowds-and-machines reek of *Transient Meridian*'s teeming slums, the canned air of ships and anemopters.

"It smells just like home," she remarked. "Why is that?"

No one answered.

The ridge leveled off. They came out into a cleared space, overlooking the camp. Spread out below them Bianca saw the airfield, the globular tanks and pipes of the poachers' little industrial plant, the bungalows in the distance — and, in between, the red-brown earth of the killing ground,

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stretching out to the cliff-edge and the bases of the nearest translucent fins.

"This is a good spot," Valadez declared. "Should be a good view from up here."

"A view of what?" said Fry.

The poacher didn't answer. He waved to Ismaíl, and the *firija* took a small folding stool out of a pocket, snapping it into shape with a flick of sinuous arms and setting it down behind him. Valadez sat.

After a moment, the answer to Fry's question came up over the edge.

Bianca had not thought much at all about the killing of a *zaratán*, and when she had thought of it she had imagined something like the harpooning of a whale in ancient times, the great beast fleeing, pursued by the tiny harassing shapes of boats, gored by harpoons, sounding again and again, all the strength bleeding out of the beast until there was nothing left for it to do but wallow gasping on the surface and expire, noble and tragic. Now Bianca realized that for all their great size, the *zaratanes* were far weaker than any whale, far less able to fight or to escape or even — she sincerely hoped — to understand what was happening to them.

There was nothing noble about the way the nameless *zaratán* died. Anemopters landed men and aliens with drilling tools at the base of each hundred-meter fin, to bore through soil and scale and living flesh and cut the connecting nerves that controlled them. This took about fifteen minutes; and to Bianca there seemed to be something obscene in the way the paralyzed fins hung there afterward, lifeless and limp. Thus crippled, the beast was pushed and pulled by aerial tugs — awkward machines, stubby and cylindrical, converted from the stationkeeping engines of vacuum balloons like *Transient Meridian* — into position over Encantada's killing ground. Then the drilling teams moved in again, to the places marked for them ahead of time by seismic sensors and ultrasound, cutting this time through bone as well as flesh, to find the *zaratán*'s brain.

When the charges the drilling teams had planted went off, a ripple went through the *zaratán*'s body, a slow-motion convulsion that took nearly a minute to travel down the body's long axis, as the news of death passed from synapse to synapse; and Bianca saw flocks of birds started

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from the trees along the *zaratán*'s back as if by an earthquake, which in a way she supposed this was. The carcass immediately began to pitch downward, the nose dropping — the result, Bianca realized, of sphincters relaxing one by one, all along the *zaratán*'s length, venting hydrogen from the ballonets.

Then the forward edge of the keel fin hit the ground and crumpled, and the whole length of the dead beast, a hundred thousand tons of it, crashed down into the field; and even at that distance Bianca could hear the cracking of gargantuan bones.

She shivered, and glanced at her pocket system. The whole process, she was amazed to see, had taken less than half an hour.

"That's this trip paid for, whatever else happens," said Valadez. He turned to Bianca. "Mostly, though, I thought you should see this. Have you guessed yet what it is I'm paying you to do, Miss Nazario?"

Bianca shook her head. "Clearly you don't need an aeronautical engineer to do what you've just done." She looked down at the killing ground, where men and aliens and machines were already climbing over the *zaratán*'s carcass, uprooting trees, peeling back skin and soil in great strips like bleeding boulevards. A wind had come up, blowing from the killing ground across the camp, bringing with it a smell that Bianca associated with butcher shops.

An engineering problem, she reminded herself, as she turned her back on the scene and faced Valadez. That's all this is.

"How are you going to get it out of here?" she asked.

"Cargo-lifter," said Valadez. "The *Lupita Jeréz*. A supply ship, diverted from one of the balloon stations."

The alien, Ismaíl, said: "Like fly anemopter make transatmospheric." The same fluting voice and broken Arabic. "Lifter plenty payload mass limit, but fly got make have packaging. Packaging for got make platform have stable." On the word *packaging* the *firija*'s arms made an expressive gesture, like rolling something up into a bundle and tying it.

Bianca nodded hesitantly, hoping she understood. "And so you can only take the small ones," she said. "Right? Because there's only one place on Sky you'll find a stable platform that size: on the back of another *zaratán*."

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"You have the problem in a nutshell, Miss Nazario," said Valadez. "Now, how would you solve it? How would you bag, say, Encantada here? How would you bag Finisterra?"

Fry said: "You want to take one *alive*?" His face was even more pale than usual. Bianca noticed that he, too, had turned his back to the killing ground.

Valadez was still looking at Bianca, expectantly.

"He doesn't want it alive, Mr. Fry," she said, watching the poacher. "He wants it dead — but intact. You could take even Finisterra apart, and lift it piece by piece, but you'd need a thousand cargo-lifters to do it."

Valadez smiled.

"I've got another ship," he said. "Built for deep mining, outfitted as a mobile elevator station. Counterweighted. The ship itself isn't rated for atmosphere, but if you can get one of the big ones to the edge of space, we'll lower the skyhook, catch the beast, and catapult it into orbit. The buyer's arranged an FTL tug to take it from there."

Bianca made herself look back at the killing ground. The workers were freeing the bones, lifting them with aerial cranes and feeding them into the plant; for cleaning and preservation, she supposed. She turned back to Valadez.

"We should be able to do that, if the *zaratán*'s body will stand up to the low pressure," she said. "But why go to all this trouble? I've seen the balloon stations. I've seen what you people can do with materials. How hard can it be to make an imitation *zaratán*?"

Valadez glanced at Ismaíl. The walker was facing the killing ground, but two of the alien's many eyes were watching the sky — and two more were watching Valadez. The poacher looked back at Bianca.

"An imitation's one thing, Miss Nazario; the real thing is something else. And worth a lot more, to the right buyer." He looked away again; not at Ismaíl this time, but up the slope, through the trees. "Besides," he added, "in this case I've got my own reasons."

"Ship come," Ismaíl announced.

Bianca looked and saw more of the *firija*'s eyes turning upward. She followed their gaze. At first she saw only empty sky. Then the air around the descending *Lupita Jeréz* boiled into contrails, outlining the invisible ovoid shape of the ship's lifting fields.

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"Time to get to work," said Valadez.

Bianca glanced toward the killing ground. A pink fog was rising to cover the work of the flensing crews.

The air was full of blood.

5. *The Aeronauts*

Valadez's workers cleaned the nameless *zaratán*'s bones one by one; they tanned the hide, and rolled it into bundles for loading aboard the *Lupita Jeréz*. That job, grotesque though it was, was the cleanest part of the work. What occupied most of the workers was the disposal of the unwanted parts, a much dirtier and more arduous job. Exotic internal organs the size of houses; tendons like braided, knotted bridge cables; ballonets large enough, each of them, to lift an ordinary dirigible; and hectares and hectares of pale, dead flesh. The poachers piled up the mess with earth-moving machines and shoveled it off the edge of the killing ground, a rain of offal falling into the clouds in a mist of blood, manna for the ecology of the deep air. They sprayed the killing ground with antiseptics, and the cool air helped to slow decay a little, but by the fourth day the butcher-shop smell had nonetheless given way to something worse.

Bianca's bungalow was one of the farthest out, only a few dozen meters from Encantada's edge, where the wind blew in from the open eastern sky, and she could turn her back on the slaughter to look out into clear air, dotted with the small, distant shapes of younger *zaratanes*. Even here, though, a kilometer and more upwind of the killing ground, the air carried a taint of spoiled meat. The sky was full of insects and scavenger birds, and there were always vermin underfoot.

Bianca spent most of her time indoors, where the air was filtered and the wet industrial sounds of the work muted. The bungalow was outfitted with all the mechanisms the *extrañados* used to make themselves comfortable, but while in the course of her journey Bianca had learned to operate these, she made little use of them. Besides her traveling chest — a gift from her older brother's wife, which served as armoire, desk, dresser, and drafting table — the only furnishings were a woven carpet in the Lagos Grandes style, a hard little bed, and a single wooden chair, not very

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different from the ones in her room in Punta Aguila. Of course those had been handmade, and these were simulations provided by the bungalow's machines.

The rest of the room was given over to the projected spaces of Bianca's engineering work. The tools Valadez had given her were slick and fast and factory-fresh, the state of somebody's art, somewhere; but what Bianca mostly found herself using was her pocket system's crippled copy of the Nazario family automation.

The system Bianca's father used to use, to calculate stresses in fabric and metal and wood, to model the flow of air over wings and the variation of pressure and temperature through gasbags, was six centuries old, a slow, patient, reliable thing that dated from before the founding of the London Caliphate. It had aged along with the family, grown used to their quirks and to the strange demands of aviation in Rio Pícaro. Bianca's version of it, limited though it was, at least didn't balk at control surfaces supported by muscle and bone, at curves not aerodynamically smooth but fractally complex with grasses and trees and hanging vines. If the *zaratanes* had been machines, they would have been marvels of engineering, with their internal networks of gasbags and ballonets, their reservoir-sized ballast bladders full of collected rainwater, their great delicate fins. The *zaratanes* were beyond the poachers' systems' stubborn, narrow-minded comprehension; for all their speed and flash, the systems sulked like spoiled children whenever Bianca tried to use them to do something their designers had not expected her to do.

Which she was doing, all the time. She was working out how to draw up Leviathan with a hook.

"Miss Nazario."

Bianca started. She had yet to grow used to these *extrañado* telephones that never rang, but only spoke to her out of the air, or perhaps out of her own head.

"Mr. Valadez," she said, after a moment.

"Whatever you're doing, drop it," said Valadez's voice. "You and Fry. I'm sending a 'mopter for you."

"I'm working," said Bianca. "I don't know what Fry's doing."

"This *is* work," said Valadez. "Five minutes."

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A change in the quality of the silence told Bianca that Valadez had hung up. She sighed; then stood, stretched, and started to braid her hair.

The anemopter brought them up over the dorsal ridge, passing between two of the great translucent fins. At this altitude, Encantada's body was clear of vegetation; Bianca looked down on hectares of wind-blasted gray hide, dusted lightly with snow. They passed within a few hundred meters of one of the huge spars that anchored the after fin's leading edge: a kilometers-high pillar of flesh, teardrop in cross-section and at least a hundred meters thick. The trailing edge of the next fin, by contrast, flashed by in an instant. Bianca had only a brief impression of a silk-supple membrane, veined with red, clear as dirty glass.

"What do you think he wants?" Fry asked.

"I don't know." She nodded her head toward the *firija* behind them at the steering console. "Did you ask the pilot?"

"I tried," Fry said. "Doesn't speak Arabic."

Bianca shrugged. "I suppose we'll find out soon enough."

Then they were coming down again, down the western slope. In front of Bianca was the dorsal ridge of Zaratán Finisterra. Twenty kilometers away and blue with haze, it nonetheless rose until it seemed to cover a third of the sky.

Bianca looked out at it, wondering again what kept Encantada and Finisterra so close; but then the view was taken away and they were coming down between the trees, into a shady, ivy-filled creekbed somewhere not far from Encantada's western edge. There was another anemopter already there, and a pair of aerial tugs — and a whitish mass that dwarfed all of these, sheets and ribbons of pale material hanging from the branches and draped over the ivy, folds of it damming the little stream.

With an audible splash, the anemopter set down, the ramps lowered, and Bianca stepped off into cold ankle-deep water that made her glad of her knee-high boots. Fry followed, gingerly.

"You!" called Valadez, pointing at Fry from the deck of the other anemopter. "Come here. Miss Nazario — I'd like you to have a look at that balloon."

"Balloon?"

Valadez gestured impatiently downstream. Suddenly Bianca saw the

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white material for the shredded, deflated gasbag it was; and saw, too, that there was a basket attached to it, lying on its side, partially submerged in the middle of the stream. Ismaíl was standing over it, waving.

Bianca splashed over to the basket. It actually *was* a basket, two meters across and a meter and a half high, woven from strips of something like bamboo or rattan. The gasbag — this was obvious, once Bianca saw it up close — had been made from one of the ballonets of a *zaratán*, a *zaratán* younger and smaller even than the one Bianca had seen killed; it had been tanned, but inexpertly, and by someone without access to the sort of industrial equipment the poachers used.

Bianca wondered about the way the gasbag was torn up. The tissues of the *zaratánes*, she knew, were very strong. A hydrogen explosion?

"Make want fly got very bad," Ismaíl commented, as Bianca came around to the open side of the basket.

"They certainly did," she said.

In the basket there were only some wool blankets and some empty leather waterbags, probably used both for drinking water and for ballast. The lines used to control the vent flaps were all tangled together, and tangled, too, with the lines that secured the gasbag to the basket, but Bianca could guess how they had worked. No stove. It seemed to have been a pure hydrogen balloon; and why not, she thought, with all the hydrogen anyone could want free from the nearest *zaratán*'s vent valves?

"Where did it come from?" she asked.

Ismaíl rippled his arms in a way that Bianca guessed was meant to be an imitation of a human shrug. One of his eyes glanced downstream.

Bianca fingered the material of the basket: tough, woody fiber. Tropical, from a climate warmer than Encantada's. She followed Ismaíl's glance. The trees hid the western horizon, but she knew, if she could see beyond them, what would be there.

Aloud, she said: "Finisterra."

She splashed back to the anemopters. Valadez's hatch was open.

"I'm telling you," Fry was saying, "I don't know her!"

"Fuck off, Fry," Valadez said as Bianca stepped into the cabin. "Look at her ID."

The *her* in question was a young woman with short black hair and

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sallow skin, wearing tan off-world cottons like Fry's under a colorful homespun *serape*; and at first Bianca was not sure the woman was alive, because the man next to her on Valadez's floor, also in homespun, was clearly dead, his eyes half-lidded, his olive skin gone muddy gray.

The contents of their pockets were spread out on a low table. As Bianca was taking in the scene, Fry bent down and picked up a Consilium-style ID tag.

"'Edith Dinh,'" he read. He tossed the tag back and looked at Valadez. "So?"

"'Edith Dinh, *Consilium Ethnological Service*,'" Valadez growled. "Issued Shawwal '43. *You* were here with the *Ecological* Service from Rajab '42 to Muharram '46. Look again!"

Fry turned away.

"All right!" he said. "Maybe — maybe I met her once or twice."

"So," said Valadez. "Now we're getting somewhere. Who the hell is she? And what's she doing *here*?"

"She's...." Fry glanced at the woman and then quickly looked away. "I don't know. I think she was a population biologist or something. There was a group working with the, you know, the natives — "

"There aren't any natives on Sky," said Valadez. He prodded the dead man with the toe of his boot. "You mean these *cabrónes*?"

Fry nodded. "They had this 'sustainable development' program going — farming, forestry. Teaching them how to live on Finisterra without killing it."

Valadez looked skeptical. "If the Consilium wanted to stop them from killing Finisterra, why didn't they just send in the wardens?"

"Interdepartmental politics. The *zaratanes* were EcoServ's responsibility; the n- — I mean, the *inhabitants* were EthServ's." Fry shrugged. "You know the wardens. They'd have taken bribes from anyone who could afford it and shot the rest."

"Damn right I know the wardens." Valadez scowled. "So instead EthServ sent in these do-gooders to teach them to make balloons?"

Fry shook his head. "I don't know anything about that."

"Miss Nazario? Tell me about that balloon."

"It's a hydrogen balloon, I think. Probably filled from some *zaratán*'s external vents." She shrugged. "It looks like the sort of thing I'd expect someone living out here to build, if that's what you mean."

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Valadez nodded.

"But," Bianca added, "I can't tell you why it crashed."

Valadez snorted. "I don't need you to tell me that," he said. "It crashed because we shot it down." Pitching his voice for the anemopter's communication system, he called out: "Ismaíl!"

Bianca tried to keep the shock from showing on her face, and after a moment she had regained her composure. *You knew they were criminals when you took their money*, she told herself.

The *firija*'s eyes came around the edge of the doorway.

"Yes?"

"Tell the tug crews to pack that thing up," said Valadez. "Every piece, every scrap. Pack it up and drop it into clear air."

The alien's walking machine clambered into the cabin. Its legs bent briefly, making a little bob like a curtsey.

"Yes." Ismaíl gestured at the bodies of the dead man and the unconscious woman. Several of the *firija*'s eyes met Valadez's. "These two what do?" he asked.

"Them, too," said Valadez. "Lash them into the basket."

The *firija* made another bob and started to bend down to pick them up.

Bianca looked down at the two bodies, both of them, the dead man and the unconscious woman, looking small and thin and vulnerable. She glanced at Fry, whose eyes were fixed on the floor, his lips pressed together in a thin line.

Then she looked over at Valadez, who was methodically sweeping the balloonists' effects into a pile, as if neither Bianca nor Fry was present.

"No," she said.

Ismaíl stopped and straightened up.

"What?" said Valadez.

"*No*," Bianca repeated.

"You want her bringing the wardens down on us?" Valadez demanded.

"That's murder, Mr. Valadez," Bianca said. "I won't be a party to it."

The poacher's eyes narrowed. He gestured at the dead man.

"You're already an accessory," he said.

"After the fact," Bianca replied evenly. She kept her eyes on Valadez.

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The poacher looked at the ceiling. "Fuck your mother," he muttered. He looked down at the two bodies, and at Ismaíl, and then over at Bianca. He sighed heavily.

"All right," he said to the *firija*. "Take the live one back to the camp. Secure a bungalow, one of the ones out by the edge" — he glanced at Bianca — "and lock her in it. Okay?"

"Okay," said Ismaíl. "Dead one what do?"

Valadez looked at Bianca again. "The dead one," he said, "goes in the basket."

Bianca looked at the dead man again, wondering what bravery or madness had brought him aboard that fragile balloon, and wondering what he would have thought if he had known that the voyage would end this way, with his body tumbling down into the deep air. She supposed he must have known there was a chance of it.

After a moment, she nodded, once.

"Right," said Valadez. "Now get back to work, damn it."

6. *The City of the Dead*

The anemopter that brought Bianca and Fry over the ridge took them back. Fry was silent, hunched, his elbows on his knees, staring at nothing. What fear or guilt was going through his mind, Bianca couldn't guess.

After a little while she stopped watching him. She thought about the Finisterran balloon, so simple, so fragile, making her father's wood-and-silk craft look as sophisticated as the *Lupita Jeréz*. She took out her pocket system, sketched a simple globe and basket, then erased them.

Make want fly very bad, Ismaíl the *firija* had said. Why?

Bianca undid the erasure, bringing her sketch back. She drew the spherical balloon out into a blunt torpedo, round at the nose, tapering to a point behind. Added fins. An arrangement of pulleys and levers, allowing them to be controlled from the basket. A propeller, powered by — she had to think for a little while — by an alcohol-fueled engine, carved from *zaratán* bones....

The anemopter was landing. Bianca sighed and again erased the design.

* * *

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The *firija* guard outside Edith Dinh's bungalow didn't seem to speak Arabic or Spanish, or for that matter any human language at all. Bianca wondered if the choice was deliberate, the guard chosen by Valadez as a way of keeping a kind of solitary confinement.

Or was the guard Valadez's choice at all? she wondered suddenly. Looking at the meter-long weapon cradled in the alien's furred arms, she shivered.

Then she squared her shoulders and approached the bungalow. Wordlessly, she waved the valise she was carrying, as if by it her reason for being there were made customary and obvious.

The alien said something in its own fluting language — whether a reply to her, or a request for instructions from some unseen listener, Bianca couldn't tell. Either those instructions were to let her pass, apparently, or by being seen in Valadez's company she had acquired some sort of reflected authority; because the *firija* lifted its weapon and, as the bungalow's outer door slid open, motioned for her to enter. The inner door was already open.

"*¿Hóla?*" Bianca called out, tentatively. Immediately she felt like an idiot.

But the answer came:

"*Aqui.*"

The interior layout of the bungalow was the same as Bianca's. The voice came from the sitting room. Bianca found Dinh there, still wearing the clothes she'd had on when they found her, sitting with her knees drawn up, staring out the east window into the sky. The east was dark with rain clouds, and far below, Bianca could see flashes of lightning.

"*Salaam aleikum,*" said Bianca, taking refuge in the formality of the Arabic.

"*Aleikum as-salaam,*" Dinh replied. She glanced briefly at Bianca and looked away; then looked back again. In a Spanish that was somewhere between Valadez's strange accent and the mechanical fluency of Fry's language module, she said: "You're not from Finisterra."

"No," said Bianca, giving up on the Arabic. "I'm from Rio Pícaro — from Earth. My name is Nazario, Bianca Nazario y Arenas."

"Edith Dinh."

Dinh stood up. There was an awkward moment, where Bianca was

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not sure whether to bow or curtsey or give Dinh her hand. She settled for proffering the valise.

"I brought you some things," she said. "Clothes, toiletries."

Dinh looked surprised. "Thanks," she said, taking the valise and looking inside.

"Are they feeding you? I could bring you some food."

"The kitchen still works," said Dinh. She held up a white packet. "And these?"

"Sanitary napkins," said Bianca.

"Sanitary...?" Color rose to Dinh's face. "Oh. That's all right. I've got implants." She dropped the packet back in the valise and closed it.

Bianca looked away, feeling her own cheeks blush in turn. Damned *extrañados*, she thought. "I'd better — " be going, she started to say.

"Please — " said Dinh.

The older woman and the younger stood there for a moment, looking at each other. Bianca suddenly wondered what impulse had brought her here, whether curiosity or Christian charity or simply a moment of loneliness, weakness. Of course she'd had to stop Valadez from killing the girl, but this was clearly a mistake.

"Sit," Dinh said. "Let me get you something. Tea. Coffee."

"I — All right." Bianca sat, slowly, perching on the edge of one of the too-soft *extrañado* couches. "Coffee," she said.

The coffee was very dark, sweeter than Bianca liked it, flavored with something like condensed milk. She was glad to have it, regardless, glad to have something to look at and something to occupy her hands.

"You don't look like a poacher," Dinh said.

"I'm an aeronautical engineer," Bianca said. "I'm doing some work for them." She looked down at her coffee, took a sip, and looked up. "What about you? Fry said you're a biologist of some kind. What were you doing in that balloon?"

She couldn't tell whether the mention of Fry's name had registered, but Dinh's mouth went thin. She glanced out the west window.

Bianca followed her glance and saw the guard, slumped in its walker, watching the two women with one eye each. She wondered again whether Valadez was really running things, and then whether the *firija*'s ignorance

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of human language was real or feigned — and whether, even if it *was* real, someone less ignorant might be watching and listening, unseen.

Then she shook her head and looked back at Dinh, waiting.

"Finisterra's falling," Dinh said eventually. "Dying, maybe. It's too big; it's losing lift. It's fallen more than fifty meters in the last year alone."

"That doesn't make sense," Bianca said. "The lift-to-weight ratio of an aerostat depends on the ratio of volume to surface area. A larger *zaratán* should be *more* efficient, not less. And even if it *does* lose lift, it should only fall until it reaches a new equilibrium."

"It's not a *machine*," Dinh said. "It's a living creature."

Bianca shrugged. "Maybe it's old age, then," she said. "Everything has to die, sometime."

"Not like this," Dinh said. She set down her coffee and turned to face Bianca fully. "Look. We don't know who built Sky, or how long ago, but it's obviously artificial. A gas giant with a nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere? That *doesn't happen*. And the Earthlike biology — the *zaratánes* are DNA-based, did you know that? The whole place is astronomically unlikely; if the Phenomenological Service had its way, they'd just quarantine the entire system, and damn Sky and everybody on it.

"The archipelago ecology is as artificial as everything else. Whoever designed it must have been very good; post-human, probably, maybe even post-singularity. It's a robust equilibrium, full of feedback mechanisms, ways to correct itself. But we, us ordinary humans and human-equivalents, we've" — she made a helpless gesture — "*fucked it up*. You know why Encantada's stayed here so long? Breeding, that's why...or maybe 'pollination' would be a better way to put it...."

She looked over at Bianca.

"The death of an old *zaratán* like Finisterra should be balanced by the birth of dozens, hundreds. But you, those bastards you work for, you've killed them all."

Bianca let the implication of complicity slide. "All right, then," she said. "Let's hear your plan."

"What?"

"Your *plan*," Bianca repeated. "For Finisterra. How are you going to save it?"

Dinh stared at her for a moment, then shook her head. "I can't," she

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said. She stood up and went to the east window. Beyond the sheet of rain that now poured down the window, the sky was deep mauve shading to indigo, relieved only by the lightning that sparked in the deep and played across the fins of the distant *zaratanes* of the archipelago's outer reaches. Dinh put her palm flat against the diamond pane.

"I *can't* save Finisterra," she said quietly. "I just want to stop you *hijos de puta* from doing this again."

Now Bianca was stung. "*Hija de puta*, yourself," she said. "You're killing them, too. Killing them and making balloons out of them, how is that better?"

Dinh turned back. "One *zaratán* the size of the one they're slaughtering out there right now would keep the Finisterrans in balloons for a hundred years," she said. "The only way to save the archipelago is to make the *zaratanes* more valuable alive than dead — and the only value a live *zaratán* has, on Sky, is as living space."

"You're trying to get the Finisterrans to colonize the other *zaratanes*?" Bianca asked. "But why should they? What's in it for them?"

"I told you," Dinh said. "Finisterra's dying." She looked out the window, down into the depths of the storm, both hands pressed against the glass. "Do you know how falling into Sky kills you, Bianca? First, there's the pressure. On the slopes of Finisterra, where the people live, it's a little more than a thousand millibars. Five kilometers down, under Finisterra's keel, it's double that. At two thousand millibars you can still breathe the air. At three thousand, nitrogen narcosis sets in — 'rapture of the deep,' they used to call it. At four thousand, the partial pressure of oxygen alone is enough to make your lungs bleed."

She stepped away from the window and looked at Bianca.

"But you'll never live to suffer that," she said. "Because of the heat. Every thousand meters the average temperature rises six or seven degrees. Here it's about fifteen. Under Finisterra's keel it's closer to fifty. Twenty kilometers down, the air is hot enough to boil water."

Bianca met her gaze steadily. "I can think of worse ways to die," she said.

"There are seventeen thousand people on Finisterra," said Dinh. "Men, women, children, old people. There's a town — they call it the Lost City, *la ciudad perdida*. Some of the families on Finisterra can trace their

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roots back six generations." She gave a little laugh, with no humor in it. "They should call it *la ciudad muerta*. They're the walking dead, all seventeen thousand of them. Even though no one alive on Finisterra today will live to see it die. Already the crops are starting to fail. Already more old men and old women die every summer, as the summers get hotter and drier. The children of the children who are born today will have to move up into the hills as it gets too hot to grow crops on the lower slopes; but the soil isn't as rich up there, so many of those crops will fail, too. And *their* children's children...won't live to be old enough to have children of their own."

"Surely someone will rescue them before then," Bianca said.

"Who?" Dinh asked. "The Consilium? Where would they put them? The vacuum balloon stations and the elevator gondolas are already overcrowded. As far as the rest of Sky is concerned, the Finisterrans are 'malcontents' and 'criminal elements.' Who's going to take them in?"

"Then Valadez is doing them a favor," Bianca said.

Dinh started. "*Emmanuel Valadez* is running your operation?"

"It's *not my* operation," Bianca said, trying to keep her voice level. "And I didn't ask his first name."

Dinh fell into the window seat. "Of course it would be," she said. "Who else would they...." She trailed off, looking out the west window, toward the killing ground.

Then, suddenly, she turned back to Bianca.

"What do you mean, *doing them a favor*?" she said.

"Finisterra," Bianca said. "He's poaching Finisterra."

Dinh stared at her. "My God, Bianca! What about the people?"

"What about them?" asked Bianca. "They'd be better off somewhere else — you said that yourself."

"And what makes you think Valadez will evacuate them?"

"He's a *thief*, not a mass murderer."

Dinh gave her a withering look. "He *is* a murderer, Bianca. His father was a warden, his mother was the wife of the *alcalde* of Ciudad Perdida. He killed his own stepfather, two uncles, and three brothers. They were going to execute him — throw him over the edge — but a warden airboat picked him up. He spent two years with them, then killed his sergeant and

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three other wardens, stole their ship and sold it for a ticket off-world. He's probably the most wanted man on Sky."

She shook her head and, unexpectedly, gave Bianca a small smile.

"You didn't know any of that when you took the job, did you?"

Her voice was full of pity. It showed on her face as well, and suddenly Bianca couldn't stand to look at it. She got up and went to the east window. The rain was lighter now, the lightning less frequent.

She thought back to her simulations, her plans for lifting Finisterra up into the waiting embrace of the skyhook: the gasbags swelling, the *zaratán* lifting, first slowly and then with increasing speed, toward the upper reaches of Sky's atmosphere. But now her inner vision was not the ghost-shape of a projection but a living image — trees cracking in the cold, water freezing, blood boiling from the ground in a million, million tiny hemorrhages.

She saw her mother's house in Punta Aguila — her sister-in-law's house, now: saw its windows rimed with frost, the trees in the courtyard gone brown and sere. She saw the Mercado de los Maculados beneath a blackening sky, the awnings whipped away by a thin wind, ice-cold, bone-dry.

He killed that Finisterran balloonist, she thought. He was ready to kill Dinh. He's capable of murder.

Then she shook her head.

Killing one person, or two, to cover up a crime, was murder, she thought. Killing seventeen thousand people by deliberate asphyxiation — men, women, and children — wasn't murder, it was genocide.

She took her cup of coffee from the table, took a sip and put it down again.

"Thank you for the coffee," she said. She turned to go.

"How can you just let him do this?" Dinh demanded. "How can you *help him do this*?"

Bianca turned on her. Dinh was on her feet; her fists were clenched, and she was shaking. Bianca stared her down, her face as cold and blank as she could make it. She waited until Dinh turned away, throwing herself into a chair, staring out the window.

"I saved your life," Bianca told her. "That was more than I needed to do. Even if I *did* believe that Valadez meant to kill every person on Finisterra, *which I don't*, that wouldn't make it my problem."

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Dinh turned farther away.

"Listen to me," Bianca said, "because I'm only going to explain this once."

She waited until Dinh, involuntarily, turned back to face her.

"This job is my one chance," Bianca said. "*This job* is what I'm here to do. I'm not here to save the world. Saving the world is a luxury for spoiled *extrañado* children like you and Fry. It's a luxury I don't have."

She went to the door, and knocked on the window to signal the *firija* guard.

"I'll get you out of here if I can," she added, over her shoulder. "But that's all I can do. I'm sorry."

Dinh hadn't moved.

As the *firija* opened the door, Bianca heard Dinh stir.

"*Erasmus* Fry?" she asked. "The naturalist?"

"That's right." Bianca glanced back, and saw Dinh looking out the window again.

"I'd like to see him," Dinh said.

"I'll let him know," said Bianca.

The guard closed the door behind her.

7. *The Face in the Mirror*

Lightning still played along Encantada's dorsal ridge, but here on the eastern edge the storm had passed. A clean, electric smell was in the air, relief from the stink of the killing ground. Bianca returned to her own bungalow through rain that had died to a drizzle.

She called Fry.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Miss Dinh," Bianca said. "She wants to see you."

There was silence on the other end. Then:

"You told her I was here?"

"Sorry," Bianca said insincerely. "It just slipped out."

More silence.

"You knew her better than you told Valadez, didn't you," she said.

She heard Fry sigh. "Yes."

"She seemed upset," Bianca said. "You should go see her."

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Fry sighed again, but said nothing.

"I've got work to do," Bianca said. "I'll talk to you later."

She ended the call.

She was supposed to make a presentation tomorrow, to Valadez and some of the poachers' crew bosses, talking about what they would be doing to Finisterra. It was mostly done; the outline was straightforward, and the visuals could be auto-generated from the design files. She opened the projection file and poked at it for a little while, but found it hard to concentrate.

Suddenly to Bianca her clothes smelled of death, of Dinh's dead companion and the slaughtered *zaratán* and the death she'd spared Dinh from and the eventual deaths of all the marooned Finisterrans. She stripped them off and threw them in the recycler; bathed, washed her hair, changed into a nightgown.

They should call it la ciudad muerta.

Even though no one who's alive on Finisterra today will live to see it die.

She turned off the light, Dinh's words echoing in her head, and tried to sleep. But she couldn't; she couldn't stop thinking. Thinking about what it felt like to be forced to live on, when all you had to look forward to was death.

She knew that feeling very well.

What Bianca had on Pablo's wife Mélia, the instrument-maker's daughter, was ten years of age and a surreptitious technical education. What Mélia had on Bianca was a keen sense of territory and the experience of growing up in a house full of sisters. Bianca continued to live in the house after Mélia moved in, even though it was Mélia's house now, and continued, without credit, to help her brother with the work that came in. But she retreated over the years, step by step, until the line was drawn at the door of the fourth-floor room that had been hers ever since she was a girl; and she buried herself in her blueprints and her calculations, and tried to pretend she didn't know what was happening.

And then there was the day she met her *other* sister-in-law. Her *moro* sister-in-law. In the Mercado de los Maculados, where the aliens and the *extrañados* came to sell their trinkets and their medicines. A dispensation from the *ayuntamiento* had recently opened it to Christians.

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Zahra al-Halim, a successful architect, took Bianca to her home, where Bianca ate caramels and drank blackberry tea and saw her older brother for the first time in more than twenty years, and tried very hard to call him Walíd and not Jesús. Here was a world that could be hers, too, she sensed, if she wanted it. But like Jesús/Walíd, she would have to give up her old world to have it. Even if she remained a Christian she would never see the inside of a church again. And she would still never be accepted by the engineers' guild.

She went back to the Nazario house that evening, ignoring the barbed questions from Mélia about how she had spent her day; she went back to her room, with its blueprints and its models, and the furnishings she'd had all her life. She tried for a little while to work, but was unable to muster the concentration she needed to interface with the system.

Instead she found herself looking into the mirror.

And looking into the mirror Bianca focused not on the fragile trapped shapes of the flying machines tacked to the wall behind her, spread out and pinned down like so many chloroformed butterflies, but on her own tired face, the stray wisps of dry, brittle hair, the lines that years of captivity had made across her forehead and around her eyes. And, meeting those eyes, it seemed to Bianca that she was looking not into the mirror but down through the years of her future, a long, straight, narrow corridor without doors or branches, and that the eyes she was meeting at the end of it were the eyes of Death, her own, *su propria Muerte*, personal, personified.

Bianca got out of bed, turned on the lights. She picked up her pocket system. She wondered if she should call the wardens.

Instead she unerased, yet again, the sketch she'd made earlier of the simple alcohol-powered dirigible. She used the Nazario family automation to fill it out with diagrams and renderings, lists of materials, building instructions, maintenance and pre-flight checklists.

It wasn't much, but it was better than Dinh's balloon.

Now she needed a way for Dinh to get it to the Finisterrans.

For that — thinking as she did so that there was some justice in it — she turned back to the system Valadez had given her. This was the sort of work the *extrañado* automation was made for, no constraints other than those imposed by function, every trick of exotic technology available to

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be used. It was a matter of minutes for Bianca to sketch out her design; an hour or so to refine it, to trim away the unnecessary pieces until what remained was small enough to fit in the valise she'd left with Dinh. The only difficult part was getting the design automation to talk to the bungalow's fabricator, which was meant for clothes and furniture and domestic utensils. Eventually she had to use her pocket system to go out on Sky's local net — hoping as she did so that Valadez didn't have anyone monitoring her — and spend her own funds to contract the conversion out to a consulting service, somewhere out on one of the elevator gondolas.

Eventually she got it done, though. The fabricator spit out a neat package, which Bianca stuffed under the bed. Tomorrow she could get the valise back and smuggle the package to Dinh, along with the dirigible designs.

But first she had a presentation to make to Valadez. She wondered what motivated him. Nothing so simple as money — she was sure of that, even if she had trouble believing he was the monster Dinh had painted him to be. Was it revenge he was after? Revenge on his family, revenge on his homeland?

That struck Bianca a little too close to home.

She sighed and turned out the lights.

8. *The Professionals*

By morning the storm had passed and the sky was blue again, but the inside of Valadez's bungalow was dark, to display the presenters' projections to better advantage. Chairs for Valadez and the human crew bosses were arranged in a rough semicircle; with them were the aliens whose anatomy permitted them to sit down. Ismaíl and the other *firija* stood in the back, their curled arms and the spindly legs of their machines making their silhouettes look, to Bianca, incongruously like those of potted plants.

Then the fronds stirred, suddenly menacing. Bianca shivered. Who was really in charge?

No time to worry about that now. She straightened up and took out her pocket system.

"In a moment," she began, pitching her voice to carry to the back of

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the room, "Mr. Fry will be going over the *zaratán*'s metabolic processes and our plans to stimulate the internal production of hydrogen. What I'm going to be talking about is the engineering work required to make that extra hydrogen do what we need it to do."

Bianca's pocket system projected the shape of a hundred-kilometer *zaratán*, not Finisterra or any other particular individual but rather an archetype, a sort of Platonic ideal. Points of pink light brightened all across the projected *zaratán*'s back, each indicating the position of a sphincter that would have to be cut out and replaced with a mechanical valve.

"Our primary concern during the preparation phase has to be these external vents. However, we also need to consider the internal trim and ballast valves...."

As she went on, outlining the implants and grafts, surgeries and mutilations needed to turn a living *zaratán* into an animatronic corpse, a part of her was amazed at her own presumption, amazed at the strong, confident, professional tone she was taking.

It was almost as if she were a real engineer.

The presentation came to a close. Bianca drew in a deep breath, trying to maintain her veneer of professionalism. This part wasn't in her outline.

"And then, finally, there is the matter of evacuation," she said.

In the back of the room, Ismaíl stirred. "Evacuation?" he asked — the first word anyone had uttered through the whole presentation.

Bianca cleared her throat. Red stars appeared along the imaginary *zaratán*'s southeastern edge, approximating the locations of Ciudad Perdida and the smaller Finisterran villages.

"Finisterra has a population of between fifteen and twenty thousand, most of them concentrated in these settlements here," she began. "Using a ship the size of the *Lupita Jeréz*, it should take roughly — "

"Not your problem, Miss Nazario." Valadez waved a hand. "In any case, there won't be any evacuations."

Bianca looked at him, appalled; and it must have shown on her face because Valadez laughed.

"Don't look at me like that, Miss Nazario. We'll set up field domes

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over Ciudad Perdida and the central pueblos, to tide them over till we get them where they're going. If they keep their heads they should be fine." He laughed again. "Fucking hell," he said, shaking his head. "What did you think this was about? You didn't think we were going to kill twenty thousand people, did you?"

Bianca didn't answer. She shut the projection off and sat down, putting her pocket system away. Her heart was racing.

"Right," said Valadez. "Nice presentation, Miss Nazario. Mr. Fry?"

Fry stood up. "Okay," he said. "Let me — " He patted his pockets. "I, ah, I think I must have left my system in my bungalow."

Valadez sighed.

"We'll wait," he said.

The dark room was silent. Bianca tried to take slow, deep breaths. Mother of God, she thought, thank you for not letting me do anything stupid.

In the next moment she doubted herself. Dinh had been so sure. How could Bianca know whether Valadez was telling the truth?

There was no way to know, she decided. She'd just have to wait and see.

Fry came back in, breathless.

"Ah, it wasn't — "

The voice that interrupted him was loud enough that at first it was hardly recognizable as a voice; it was only a wall of sound, seeming to come from the air itself, bazaar-Arabic words echoing and reechoing endlessly across the camp.

"THIS IS AN ILLEGAL ENCAMPMENT," it said. "ALL PERSONNEL IN THE ENCAMPMENT WILL ASSEMBLE ON OPEN GROUND AND SURRENDER TO THE PARK WARDENS IN AN ORDERLY FASHION. ANY PERSONS CARRYING WEAPONS WILL BE PRESUMED TO BE RESISTING ARREST AND WILL BE DEALT WITH ACCORDINGLY. ANY VEHICLE ATTEMPTING TO LEAVE THE ENCAMPMENT WILL BE DESTROYED. YOU HAVE FIVE MINUTES TO COMPLY."

The announcement repeated itself: first in the fluting language of the *firija*, then in Miami Spanish, then as a series of projected alien glyphs, logograms and semagrams. Then the Arabic started again.

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"Fuck your mother," said Valadez grimly.

All around Bianca, poachers were gathering weapons. In the back of the room, the *firija* were having what looked like an argument, arms waving, voices raised in a hooting, atonal cacophony.

"*What do we do?*" Fry shouted, over the wardens' announcement.

"Get out of here," said Valadez.

"Make fight!" said Ismaíl, turning several eyes from the *firija* discussion.

"Isn't that *resisting arrest*?" asked Bianca.

Valadez laughed harshly. "Not shooting back isn't going to save you," he said. "The wardens aren't the Phenomenological Service. They're not civilized Caliphate cops. *Killed while resisting arrest* is what they're all about. Believe me — I used to be one."

Taking a surprisingly small gun from inside his jacket, he kicked open the door and was gone.

Around the *Lupita Jeréz* was a milling knot of people, human and otherwise, some hurrying to finish the loading, others simply fighting to get aboard.

Something large and dark — and fast — passed over the camp, and there was a white flash from the cargo-lifter, and screams.

In the wake of the dark thing came a sudden sensation of heaviness, as if the flank of Encantada were the deck of a ship riding a rogue wave, leaping up beneath Bianca's feet. Her knees buckled and she was thrown to the ground, pressed into the grass by twice, three times her normal weight.

The feeling passed as quickly as the wardens' dark vehicle. Ismaíl, whose walker had kept its footing, helped Bianca up.

"What was *that*?" Bianca demanded, bruises making her wince as she tried to brush the dirt and grass from her skirts.

"Antigravity ship," Ismaíl said. "Same principle like starship wave propagation drive."

"*Antigravity*?" Bianca stared after the ship, but it was already gone, over Encantada's dorsal ridge. "If you *coños* have antigravity, then why in God's name have we been sitting here playing with catapults and balloons?"

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"Make very expensive," said Ismaíl. "Minus two suns exotic mass, same like starship." The *firija* waved two of its free eyes. "Why do? Plenty got cheap way to fly."

Bianca realized that despite the remarks Valadez had made on the poverty of Sky, she had been thinking of all *extrañados* and aliens — with their ships and machines, their familiar way with sciences that in Rio Pícaro were barely more than a whisper of forbidden things hidden behind the walls of the rich *moros'* palaces — as wealthy, and powerful, and free. Now, feeling like a fool for not having understood sooner, she realized that between the power of the Consilium and people like Valadez there was a gap as wide as, if not wider than, the gap between those rich *moros* and the most petty Ali Baba in the back streets of Punta Aguila.

She glanced toward the airfield. Aerial tugs were lifting off; anemopters were blurring into motion. But as she watched, one of the tugs opened up into a ball of green fire. An anemopter made it as far as the killing ground before being hit by something that made its static fields crawl briefly with purple lightnings and then collapse, as the craft's material body crashed down in an explosion of earth.

And all the while the wardens' recorded voice was everywhere and nowhere, repeating its list of instructions and demands.

"Not any more, we don't," Bianca said to Ismaíl. "We'd better run."

The *firija* raised its gun. "First got kill prisoner."

"*What*?"

But Ismaíl was already moving, the mechanical legs of the walker sure-footed on the broken ground, taking long, swift strides, no longer comical but frighteningly full of purpose.

Bianca struggled after the *firija* but quickly fell behind. The surface of the killing ground was rutted and scarred, torn by the earth-moving equipment used to push the offal of the gutted *zaratanes* over the edge. Bianca supposed grasses had covered it once, but now there was just mud and old blood. Only the certainty that going back would be as bad as going forward kept Bianca moving, slipping and stumbling in reeking muck that was sometimes ankle-deep.

By the time she got to Dinh's bungalow, Ismaíl was already gone. The door was ajar.

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Maybe the wardens rescued her, Bianca thought; but she couldn't make herself believe it.

She went inside, moving slowly.

"Edith?"

No answer; not that Bianca had really expected any.

She found her in the kitchen, face down, feet toward the door as if she had been shot while trying to run, or hide. From three meters away Bianca could see the neat, black, fist-sized hole in the small of Dinh's back. She felt no need to get closer.

Fry's pocket system was on the floor in the living room, as Bianca had known it would be.

"You should have waited," Bianca said to the empty room. "You should have trusted me."

She found her valise in Dinh's bedroom and emptied the contents onto the bed. Dinh did not seem to have touched any of them.

Bianca's eyes stung with tears. She glanced again at Fry's system. He'd left it on purpose, Bianca realized; she'd underestimated him. Perhaps he had been a better person than she herself, all along.

She looked one more time at the body lying on the kitchen floor.

"No, you shouldn't," she said then. "You shouldn't have trusted me at all."

Then she went back to her own bungalow and took the package out from under the bed.

9. *Finisterra*

A hundred meters, two hundred, five hundred — Bianca falls, the wind whipping at her clothes, and the hanging vegetation that covers Encantada's flanks is a green-brown blur, going gray as it thins, as the *zaratán*'s body curves away from her. She blinks away the tears brought on by the rushing wind and tries to focus on the monitor panel of the harness. She took it from an off-the-shelf emergency parachute design; surely, she thinks, it must be set to open automatically at some point? But the wind speed indicator is the only one that makes sense; the others — altitude, attitude, rate of descent — are cycling through nonsense in three languages, baffled by the instruments' inability to find solid ground anywhere below.

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Then Bianca falls out of Encantada's shadow into the sun, and before she can consciously form the thought her hand has grasped the emergency handle of the harness and pulled, convulsively; and the glassy fabric of the paraballoon is billowing out above her, rippling like water, and the harness is tugging at her, gently but firmly, smart threads reeling themselves quickly out and then slowly in again on their tiny spinnerets.

After a moment, she catches her breath. She is no longer falling, but flying.

She wipes the tears from her eyes. To the west, the slopes of Finisterra are bright and impossibly detailed in the low-angle sunlight, a million trees casting a million tiny shadows through the morning's rapidly dissipating mist.

She looks up, out through the nearly invisible curve of the paraballoon, and sees that Encantada is burning. She watches it for a long time.

The air grows warmer, and more damp, too. With a start, Bianca realizes she is falling below Finisterra's edge. When she designed the paraballoon, Bianca intended for Dinh to fall as far as she safely could, dropping deep into Sky's atmosphere before firing up the reverse Maxwell pumps, to heat the air in the balloon and lift her back to Finisterra; but it does not look as if there is any danger of pursuit now, from either the poachers or the wardens. Bianca starts the pumps and the paraballoon slows, then begins to ascend.

As the prevailing wind carries her inland, over a riot of tropical green, and in the distance Bianca sees the smoke rising from the chimneys of Ciudad Perdida, Bianca glances up again at the burning shape of Encantada. She wonders whether she'll ever know if Valadez was telling the truth.

Abruptly the jungle below her opens up, and Bianca is flying over cultivated fields, and people are looking up at her in wonder. Without thinking, she has cut the power to the pumps and opened the parachute valve at the top of the balloon.

She lands hard, hobbled by the scarf still tied around her ankles, and rolls, the paraballoon harness freeing itself automatically in obedience to its original programming. She pulls the scarf loose and stands up, shaking out her torn, stained skirt. Children are already running toward her across the field.

Savages, Fry said. Refugees. Bianca wonders if all of them speak

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Valadez's odd Spanish. She tries to gather her scraps of Arabic, but is suddenly unable to remember anything beyond *Salaam alaikum*.

The children — six, eight, ten of them — falter as they approach, stopping five or ten meters away.

Salaam alaikum, Bianca rehearses silently. *Alaikum as-salaam*. She takes a deep breath.

The boldest of the children, a stick-legged boy of eight or ten, takes a few steps closer. He has curly black hair and sun-browned skin, and the brightly colored shirt and shorts he is wearing were probably made by an autofactory on one of the elevator gondolas or vacuum balloon stations, six or seven owners ago. He looks like her brother Pablo, in the old days, before Jesús left.

Trying not to look too threatening, Bianca meets his dark eyes.

"*Hóla*," she says.

"*Hóla*," the boy answers. "*¿Cómo te llamas*? *¿Es este su globo*?"

Bianca straightens her back.

"Yes, it's my balloon," she says. "And *you* may call me Señora Nazario."

"If the balloon's yours," the boy asks, undaunted, "will you let me fly in it?"

Bianca looks out into the eastern sky, dotted with distant *zaratanes*. There is a vision in her mind, a vision that she thinks maybe Edith Dinh saw: the skies of Sky more crowded than the skies over Rio Pícaro, Septentrionalis Archipelago alive with the bright shapes of dirigibles and gliders, those nameless *zaratanes* out there no longer uncharted shoals but comforting and familiar landmarks.

She turns to look at the rapidly collapsing paraballoon, and wonders how much work it would take to inflate it again. She takes out her pocket system and checks it: the design for the hand-built dirigible is still there, and the family automation too.

This isn't what she wanted, when she set out from home; but she is still a Nazario, and still an engineer.

She puts the system away and turns back to the boy.

"I have a better idea," she says. "How would you like a balloon of your very own?"

The boy breaks into a smile.

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CURIOSITIES

PARALLEL BOTANY, BY LEO LIONNI (1977)

FIRST published in Italy as *La botanica parallela*, this illustrated "non-fact" work is presented as popular science. It earnestly expounds the oddities of an elusive, frequently invisible, and wholly imaginary plant kingdom that coexists with botany as we know it.

Parallel plants exhibit "masslessness," seem frozen in time, lack internal structure, and generally collapse to dust at a human touch. Some defy the laws of perspective. When visible, their coloration tends to be "a gamut of blacks." The latest, still unclassified discovery is black but casts luminous shadows.

Tirils, resembling dense-packed fields of grissini, include species that emit strange whistles, strangle one another, or implant themselves disturbingly in the memory like Jorge Luis Borges' Zahir. Woodland Tweezers' distribution patterns echo positions in the game of Go. *Giraluna* the moonflower, once perhaps "an aerial plant," is naturally visible only by moonlight.

The list goes on. *Protorbis*, the "parallel mushroom," varies in size from infinitely small to infinitely large; specimens have been mistaken for mesas. The *Labirintiana* lure ants into elaborate mazes embossed on their leaves. The *Artisia* echo the styles of human artforms — "Nature imitating Art" — and one species of *Camponara* looks uncannily like a menorah. The various convoluted forms of *Solea* are most plausibly decoded as music....

Parallel Botany is full of teasing paradox and baffled scientists. Neat invented folktales from Africa, Russia, and other countries suggest that our ancestors knew of these non-plants. Overall, though, Lionni's tongue-in-cheek descriptions of weirdness become a trifle repetitive. Borges would have deftly condensed all this imaginary science into a review of an imaginary book.

—David Langford

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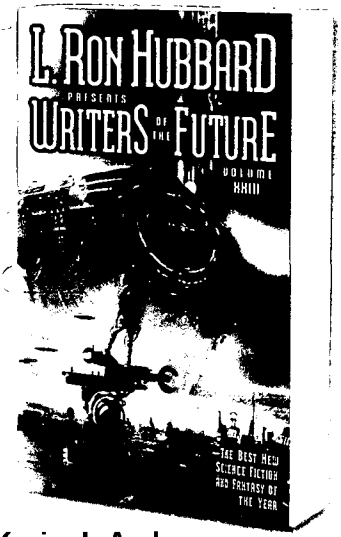

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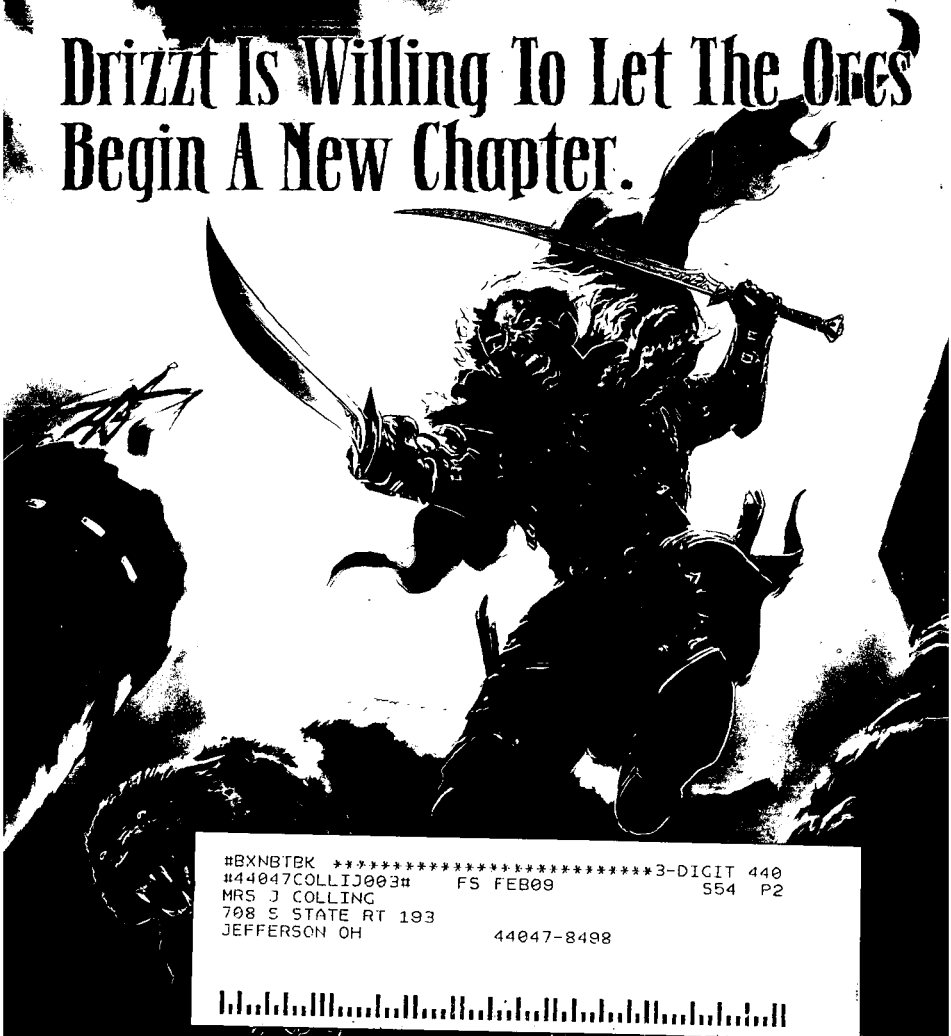

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